
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HOTELS OF THE JET AGE IN PAKISTAN AND INDIA: THE INTERCONTINENTAL IN KARACHI AND THE OBEROI INTERCONTINENTAL IN NEW DELHI

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the architecture, interior design, and promotion of new United States-financed international business and tourist hotels of the 1960s in Karachi and New Delhi, analysing these as transcultural spaces of modernity during the early jet age. In part, these and many other US-financed hotels in locations relatively close to the Soviet sphere of influence in Asia, North Africa and Europe were political symbols, promoting the the American way of life, but they were also symbolic of the aspirations of mainly post-colonial nations to project images of progress and national development.

The research builds upon other recent scholarship on the manifestations and experiences of modernism in architecture, planning and travel in the Indian Subcontinent in the post-Second World War era and how modern architecture and post-colonial political framework went hand in hand with each other.

Keywords: Post colonial architecture, nationalism, modern architecture, hotels, subcontinent.

INTRODUCTION

Markus Daeschel has shown that in the mid-twentieth century there arose across the north of the Subcontinent a middle-class political culture in which a fascination with world events was linked to desires for national and personal achievement. These would be realised through organisation, mobilisation and the embracing of new ways and modes of expression (Daeschel, 2006). Daeschel has also written on the Karachi city planner Constantinos Doxiadis whose work under the regime of General Ayub Khan between 1958-1968 exemplified the Pakistani government's aim of demonstrating its ability to deploy executive power through prominent building projects. (Daeschel, 2011). Fahran Karim has argued that the architecture of Doxiadis and the American Edward Durell Stone in Pakistan reflected political leaders' advocacy for a modern Islamic aesthetic to win popular favour by appearing to represent mainstream taste and beliefs. Islamic architectural elements were thus deployed as a tactic to

create a false sense of empowerment, but their use also indicated a postcolonial oscillation between Islam, the West and the Modern (Karim, 2020). Pippa Virdee has focused instead on the changing roles of Pakistani women through their employment by Pakistan International Airlines. She has observed how in the context of the Cold War and United States cultural diplomacy, female airline staff became markers of modernity and propaganda for the modernising vision of the Ayub era (Virdee, 2018). In this paper, it will be shown how hotels of the jet age in Pakistan and India represented and reflected comparable developments and tensions in relation to national representation.

In Europe, since the mid-nineteenth century and the advent of the railway age, the most prominent city centre hotels had been conceived as 'grand palaces' of sorts, accommodating wealth elites. In the U.S.A., a more meritocratic approach emerged in the early-twentieth century when the hotelier Ellsworth Milton Statler first applied mass-

standardisation to accommodate large numbers in comfort but a low unit cost. The first Statler Hotel was completed in 1907 in Buffalo, New York to a design by August Esenwein and James A. Johnson and had 300 identical rooms, each one equipped with a private bathroom – something never previously attempted on such a scale. Bathrooms for adjoining rooms were situated back-to-back adjacent to the corridor, thereby enabling each pair on every storey to share the same plumbing shafts, which were accessed from service hatches in the corridors. Public rooms were contained within the two bottom storeys, which had longer spans and higher ceilings than the bedroom floors (Davidson, 2005, 98-100).

What Statler pioneered quickly became the standard approach for hotel planning in the U.S.A. and, later on, around the world too. Until the 1930s, such hotels tended to be externally detailed in the Beaux Arts manner but thereafter Art Deco came to be preferred. After the Second World War, international modernism superseded these approaches, but the same essential layout was retained with public rooms either in a podium structure or extruded from beneath a multi-storey accommodation block. Early modernist examples were the Statler in Washington D.C., completed in 1943 to a design by William B. Tabler, a recent Harvard graduate employed in the long-established Chicago-based specialist hotel architects Holabird, Root and Burgee, and the Caribe Hilton in San Juan, Puerto Rico, designed by the US-trained local architects Osvaldo Toro and Miguel Ferrer and completed in 1949 (Architectural Forum, June 1943, 61-76; Builder, July 1948, 36-42; Architectural Forum, March 1950, 102). While the former was in essence little different from pre-war Statler designs, albeit shorn of decorative detail, the latter represented a more radical departure, the inspiration for which came in large part from Le Corbusier's as-yet unrealised proposals for 'Unités d'Habitation' mass housing blocks with integrated servicing. Although the Caribe Hilton was designed by Puerto Rican architects and was locally owned, it was paid for with United States money and operated by a newly-created international division of Conrad Hilton's successful and expanding U.S. hotel chain. With its up-to-date design, numerous bars and restaurants and its entertainment and leisure facilities, the Caribe Hilton became the model for subsequent Hilton and Hilton International hotels developed thereafter in the 1950s and 1960s, other early examples being the Istanbul Hilton (1955) designed by Gordon Bunshaft and Natalie DeBlois of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill's New York office and the Turkish modern architect Sedad Eldem, and the Beverly Hilton in Beverly Hills (1955), designed by Welton Becket Associates of Los Angeles (Architectural Forum, December 1955, 120-127).

Alongside Hilton International, the other major United States-owned hotel chain to become significantly involved in the specification and operation of new hotels around the world was Intercontinental, which had likewise been founded in the latter 1940s as the hotel division of Pan American World Airlines. During the 1930s, the airline had developed a network of routes between the U.S.A., the Caribbean, Central and South America and the subsequent development of hotels in these locations enabled passengers to be accommodated in comfort upon arrival. In the 1950s, as part of the State Department's Cold War policy of strengthening U.S. influence around the world, Intercontinental followed Hilton International's lead in expanding into Europe, Asia and Africa. Typically, the overseas hotels run by these corporations were owned by agencies of each national government and so their role was as lessee-operators (Wharton, 2001; Potter, 1996).

The Intercontinental Hotel in Karachi

In the second half of the 1950s, Intercontinental switched attention East. Its first management contract was signed in 1957 with the Lebanese businessman Najib Sala, owner of La Société des Grands Hotels du Liban. Intercontinental



Figure-1: The initial design proposal for a hotel in Karachi by Edward Durell Stone.
Source: Bruce Peter collection



Figure-2: The Intercontinental Hotel in Karachi, Designed by William B. Tabler.
Source: Bruce Peter collection

would operate a new 310-room luxury hotel to be built by Sala on a prime site next to the waterfront Corniche in Beirut's stylish Minet El Hosn district. At the same time, Intercontinental commenced negotiations in Pakistan, which the U.S. government sought as an ally, to run a hotel in the port city of Karachi, the country's main centre of business and commerce. One of Intercontinental's employees was M. Lee Dayton, formerly of the U.S. government's Economic Cooperation Administration, who was used as a 'scout' to find sites for hotels around the world. In Pakistan, Dayton was acquainted with a well-connected businessman and politician, Yusuf Haroon, whose father, Haji Abdullah Haroon, had in colonial times served as a member of the Indian National Assembly and had been knighted by the British. The Haroons owned *The Dawn*, Pakistan's leading English-language newspaper of which the nation's founder, Muhammed Ali Jinnah, had once been editor. Haroon was willing to raise local capital sufficient to cover more than half the cost of the Karachi Intercontinental Hotel project and the United States government's Export Credit Agency agreed in principle to assist in providing the remainder. A spacious site was acquired by a junction on Club Road close both to the city centre and the port (Potter, 1996, 72-73).

For both the Beirut and Karachi Hotels, Intercontinental recommended that Edward Durell Stone should be the lead architect. He had earlier designed the El Panama Hotel in Panama City, Panama which had been built concurrently with the Caribe Hilton in San Juan but completed with delay in 1951 (Architectural Forum, April 1951, 140-141). He therefore was well acquainted with the requirements of large resort-hotels located in hot, tropical climates. In his initial design for the Karachi Intercontinental, Stone recognised the advantages of traditional Islamic architectural approaches in screening buildings' facades with patterned trelliswork to protect against the scorching sun while still allowing air to circulate through, his intention being to enclose the entire exterior of the hotel with perforated concrete blocks, patterned with an Islamic star design. At first floor level, a flat over-sailing canopy, supported on slender columns would be built over the entire site, beneath which the lobby, public rooms and service spaces would be located. Only the lido terrace and pools would be partly exposed to sunlight filtering through what Stone described as a 'lath garden' comprising more trelliswork intertwined with plants. Rising above in the centre would be a twelve-storey bedroom block with the rooms set back by around three feet to create balconies between their fronts and the surrounding trelliswork enclosure of the façades (Hunt, 1960, 228-229). Stone's referencing of Islamic design reflected a long-standing western tradition of admiration for the architects and artists of the near east, the beauty and practicality of whose work had inspired their European counterparts since the latter eighteenth century. In the minds of subsequent

generations of progressive architects and designers – such as Stone – taking inspiration from Islamic approaches continued to seem highly appropriate and particularly so when building in a Muslim country such as Pakistan. In referencing the vernacular within an overall modernist framing, Stone's design aligned with wider approaches within architectural modernism in tropical and postcolonial contexts at that time.

Stone's design for the Karachi Intercontinental was unrealised as political events overtook the project. Instability and public disorder led President Iskander Mirza to impose martial law and, a short time after, a coup d'état was led by the powerful army Commander-in-Chief, Mohammad Ayub Khan. These occurrences caused investors to shy away from providing sufficient largesse to enable the scheme to be accomplished. Nonetheless, in the context of the Cold War, Pakistan remained strategically important for the U.S.A. Intercontinental and the hotel's financiers and developers therefore continued slow negotiations, hopeful that a satisfactory resolution might eventually be reached, enabling a scaled-down version of the project to go ahead (Potter, 1996, 72-73). Stone, however, ceased to be involved with its subsequent development.

At that time, Stone had newly overseen the completion in 1957 of his design for the new United States Embassy in the Indian capital, New Delhi and he had since gained further highly prestigious commissions for a State Legislative building in Raleigh, North Carolina, a headquarters for the National Geographic Society in Washington D.C., an art gallery in Puerto Rico and, in Pakistan, premises for the Institute of Nuclear Science and Technology in Nihore. With such a portfolio of projects to contend with, he surely would not have been particularly bothered about wasting additional energy on cost-cutting schemes for commercial hotel premises.

In Pakistan, meanwhile, Intercontinental had worked with Yusuf Haroon to achieve a compromise whereby their desired new hotel there could be afforded. Pakistan International Airlines, the national carrier with which Pan American had a code-sharing agreement, became an additional major investor to make up the remaining budget shortfall. A heavily revised scheme with only 306 bedrooms was prepared by William B. Tabler and his assistants E.R. Branning and J.B. Robinson. This would in fact be Tabler's sixth hotel for operation by Intercontinental, others being the El Salvador Intercontinental in San Salvador and the El Ponce Intercontinental in Puerto Rico, both of which were resort hotels for mainly American holidaymakers, plus smaller business-orientated hotels in Dublin, Cork and Limerick in

the Republic of Ireland (Potter, 1996, 72-73). Tabler was, of course, very well known within the hotel industry in the United States as an efficiency expert with the thorough knowledge of hotel construction and operation to cut costs wherever possible while still presenting a satisfactory-looking solution.

For Karachi, Tabler retained Edward Durell Stone's Islamic-style trellis screening surrounding the by now somewhat smaller bedroom block, which retained only nine floors of rooms rather than the original twelve. He also greatly reduced the amount of communal space on the ground floor, though leaving the key facilities in situ. Where Stone had wished to cover nearly the entire site in a canopy roof, Tabler initially reduced its extent by half, then reworked the plans again to remove it altogether, leaving most of the public rooms' surroundings open to the sun. At the entrance he instead proposed to replicate Sedad Eldem's 'flying carpet' portecochère design from the Istanbul Hilton. The ground floor frontages were given arcades with openings featuring pointed heads, also referencing Islamic design, but much more simply than Stone's trellises would have done. Advice from the structural engineer Wayman C. Wing led Tabler and his assistants to realise that in Pakistan it was unnecessary to build in accordance with United States regulations, and so the dimensioning of the main framework of the accommodation block could be reduced from eight- and ten-inch diameters to just five- and six-, thereby sparing yet more money and meaning that the final cost of the project would be just 7.4 million dollars (Architectural Record, September 1961, 136-137). Construction of the Karachi Intercontinental began in 1962 with completion scheduled for two years thereafter.

In the Architectural Record, Tabler acknowledged and responded to critics of the Karachi Intercontinental's bringing to Pakistan the same attention to efficient staffing as he had applied when designing hotels in the U.S.A., his argument being that whereas at that time wages were very low in the Indian subcontinent, meaning that much larger staffs theoretically could be employed, it was his hope and expectation that they would sooner or later catch up with levels in the United States and so the hotel needed to be designed from the outset with that possibility in mind (Architectural Record, September 1961, 136-137).

The interiors of Intercontinental-operated hotels were almost invariably devised by the operator's in-house designer, the Texas-born Neal Prince, who was an architectural graduate of Rice University in Houston and who had initially worked as a theatre manager and set designer. Typically, his schemes combined modernist elements with attempts to reflect local

character, signifying to American, local and global audiences ideas of aspirational modern luxury, tempered by traditional references, commissioned artworks and attention-grabbing 'talking points' for guests and visitors to find 'cute' or interesting. Prince was an exponent of the 'picturesque' in interiors, his earlier theatrical career having been a good training for the filling of hotels around the world with diverse scenography. When the Karachi Intercontinental's interiors came to be designed, however, Prince was involved in so many other hotel projects in Europe and the Americas that he instead outsourced the Karachi interiors to acquaintances of his, the husband-and-wife designers Dale and Patricia Kellner, whose design approach was very similar to his own. In the early-1950s they had studied interior design together at the University of Washington in Seattle, following which Dale Kellner – who was greatly interested in Japanese design and had taught himself the language – took a post-graduate degree in architectural history at Tokyo University Graduate School in Japan, during which he familiarised himself more thoroughly with South East Asian approaches. Patricia, whom he met thereafter, was at that time working for Raymond Loewy Inc. in New York. The Karachi Intercontinental was the first of many interior design projects they carried out for the growing chain. A caption on the reverse of a press photograph issued at the time of the hotel's completion in 1964 emphasises that Pakistan was essentially controlled by twenty powerful families, of whom the Haroons were one, and that the hotel's public rooms had been designed primarily to provide spaces in which they could entertain and socialise. The ballroom – which was the hotel's largest indoor space – was divisible by sliding partitions into a series of smaller dining venues for the private parties they would host. The hotel's interiors made reference to Mughal themes and otherwise continued the Islamic detailing of the exterior. According to the official history of Intercontinental, *A Room with a World View*, the Karachi Intercontinental's design:

‘...Reminded many of a confection coated in spun sugar, clad as it was in sparkling white molded cement lattice work tiles; others were reminded of a giant harem screen. The bedrooms featured tiled floors covered with handmade woollen area rugs, and original watercolour artwork by a soon to be famous local artist. Following the example of the national airline, the hotel engaged educated young men and women for all customer service positions. Female room maids were designated stewardesses and waiters were stewards, for the first time elevating these jobs to a position of respect not heretofore known in south Asia. For a while one stewardess brought her maid from home to perform the room-cleaning tasks while the mistress sat in the corridor

doing petit point.’ (Potter, 1996, 99)

When President Ayub Khan opened the hotel in May 1964, he inspected all of it very thoroughly, meeting employees in each department, enquiring about training programmes and examining bedrooms on every floor. The guests from overseas were taken on a rail and air tour of Pakistan which included ‘a hair-raising side trip via Ariana, the 49 per cent Pan Am owned national airline of Afghanistan, to Kabul and Kandahar.’ (Potter, 1996, 99)

The design of the Karachi Intercontinental, as completed was an intriguing hybrid of Edward Durell Stone’s tropical modernism, melded with the commercial expediency of William B. Tabler and the Kellners. Elements of the latter’s thematic decorative contributions also arguably represented early examples of postmodernism in international hotel interiors.

THE OBEROI INTERCONTINENTAL HOTEL IN NEW DELHI

The project for a new hotel in New Delhi originated not from within Intercontinental itself, but instead was offered to it by an up-and-coming Indian hotel entrepreneur, Rai Bahadur Mohan Singh Oberoi, who in the mid-1950s had initiated the planning and construction of a prestige American-style example there which he had intended to name the International. Oberoi had commenced the project upon discovering that in 1956 India would be hosting a major UNESCO conference and he realised that there was a lack of suitable premises to host the important attendees coming from around the world (Karakariya, 2009, 13).

In 1952, Oberoi and his family had visited Puerto Rico to stay at the recently completed Caribe Hilton. Its modern



Figure-3: The Oberoi Intercontinental Hotel in New Delhi, Designed by Durga Bajpai, Pilo Mody and Lavina Colgan.
Source: Bruce Peter collection

appearance, diverse facilities and efficient layout with a single kitchen serving several outlets greatly impressed him and so he resolved that his proposed hotel for New Delhi would be comparable in these regards (Karakariya, 2009, 84-85). The Punjabi-born entrepreneur had first entered the hotel trade in Shimla in the early-1920s, initially as an employee and then as the owner of the Hotel Carlton there. In 1934, he founded Oberoi Hotels and during the ensuing decades his chain expanded to encompass the major Indian cities and, following partition, some in Pakistan too. These were for the most part established venues designed by British architects at the height of the Raj in the twentieth century’s early decades. In New Delhi, he already leased the Imperial Hotel which dated from 1931 and, being located close to the government buildings, was very popular with visiting dignitaries (Karakariya, 2009, 105-108).

New Delhi had been planned in the early twentieth century on a grand scale by the British with a diffuse grid of wide boulevards to privilege movement by car but a great deal of traffic remained pedestrian, bicycle or drawn by animals. The city’s buildings tended to be set well back from the bustle and squalor of the streets, each within its own private compound, surrounded by high perimeter walls (the exteriors of which locals tended to use as latrines). Since independence, a new diplomatic zone had been developed on the city’s periphery at Chanakyapuri, which was cleaner and comparatively well-manicured. There, Edward Durell Stone was designing the United States Embassy and, nearby, Oberoi acquired a five-acre site for his hotel. The Indian government, however, decided that it, rather than Oberoi, should be responsible for the project and so he was forced to hand over the land. The Ashoka Hotel was soon built there to a design by the Mumbai architect E.B. Doctor with traditional jharokas and jaali work and was completed in 1956 in time for the UNESCO conference (Karakariya, 2009, 113). Oberoi was consequently required to find an alternative location for his own hotel and the best solution in the circumstances was to purchase an open area adjacent to Delhi Golf Course. Taking inspiration from his recollections of the Caribe Hilton, he planned to build India’s first major modernist example (Karakariya, 2009, 113).

Since independence, Indian architects had embraced Le Corbusier’s brutalist idiom which lent itself to local construction practices. The 350-room hotel was designed by the prominent US-educated Indian modernist architects Durga Bajpai, Pilo Mody and his wife Lavina Colgan. Bajpai and Mody had first encountered each other as children attending Doon School in Dehradun, an elite British-style public school. Subsequently, Bajpai had studied at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and then in Sweden,

working thereafter in the Stockholm office of the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, who had taught and inspired him at M.I.T. Shortly thereafter, the Parsi Baronet, Sir Cowasji Jehangir, commissioned Bajpai to design the Jehangir Art Gallery in Mumbai (Bajpai, 2020). Mody and Colgan had first met in the Architecture School of the University of California at Berkeley; the former was the son of the influential Parsi businessman Sir Homi Modi of the Tata Steel company. As a student, Mody had shared a room with the future prime minister of Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. In the early 1950s, Mody and Colgan worked for Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret on buildings for the new capital of the Indian Punjab, Chandigarh, thereafter establishing practice in New Delhi, where they designed flats for Tata senior staff. Next, they gained a commission for an air-conditioned apartment building in Bombay – a novelty in India at that time but a project that led to further commissions for similarly-equipped corporate headquarters and also for Oberoi's hotel in New Delhi.

The design and layout of the hotel obviously reflected Le Corbusier's influence; the facades of the 10-storey accommodation block featured a brise soleil containing balconies on one side while the porte-cochère, located at one end of the accommodation block, was held aloft on sculptural concrete uprights. Parts of the lower ranges – containing some of the public rooms, the banqueting suite plus a fitness centre adjacent to the outdoor pool – featured curved roof overhangs in moulded concrete (Indian Builder, June 1966, 19-64). Unfortunately, when building work was well underway, Oberoi ran out of capital and, after six years of inactivity, in 1963 the municipal authorities threatened to seize the empty shell and finish it for their own purposes. In desperation, Oberoi sought out Intercontinental Hotels Corporation as project partners and, fortunately for him, they agreed to assist with completing the hotel and to become involved in its operation (Karkariya, 2009, 112-117). Pan American World Airlines by this point operated regular flights to India and Pakistan and even carried passengers on the connecting leg of its long-haul services between the two nations. Recently, in relation to these developments, Intercontinental had made its own attempts to enter the Indian hotel trade but had been rebuffed by the government of Jawaharlal Nehru which argued that existing Indian hotel operators alone were well capable of satisfying the market there. Besides, many were suspicious of the United States' motivations and in the wake of British rule, there was a wider anti-imperialist sentiment within Indian politics and society. For their part, Intercontinental and the U.S. State Department were well aware of the need to tread cautiously in their dealings with India and to avoid as best as possible appearing in any way imperialistic. Consequently, the hotel

would be both owned and operated by Oberoi with Intercontinental having just a token shareholding. Nonetheless, as was their usual practice, they provided the specifications for the building's facilities and style of operation.

With Intercontinental's involvement, it became possible for Oberoi to access funding via the United States Export-Import Bank and this meant that the project could be achieved (Potter, 1996, 83, 103). By then, Durga Bajpai's health was in decline due to a progressive neurological disorder and so it was Mody and Colgan who oversaw the building's completion. It was inaugurated in, nearly a decade later than Oberoi had initially intended. Durga Bajpai's younger brother, Kayatyani Shankar Bajpai, who was a diplomat, recalls that:

'Oberoi often spoke admiringly of Durga, adding that the hotel was the easiest of all to run, such aids to management as corridor-to-usable space ratios having been carefully thought out. I gather it was also the first time a high rise was built in Delhi not on piling but, but as Durga proudly claimed, "floated" on a bed of concrete. Durga, however, felt rather frustrated with the assignment as he had his own ideas for designing it, but Oberoi kept saying "do what you like but it must look like the Hilton in Istanbul" which was then much in the news as a supposedly great design.' (Bajpai, 2020)

Apart from a striking bas relief panel in the lobby by Satish Gujral, the hotel's interiors were almost entirely the work of Intercontinental's Neal Prince, and these included the Taj and Moghul restaurants and the Café Chinois coffee shop, all of which, as their names suggested, used orientalist thematic treatments. The Houseboat Bar, meanwhile, attempted to evoke 'a Kashmir lake setting.' Prince also created designs for tapestries depicting peacocks to adorn the walls of the Taj Restaurant which were made by local craft weavers. The apparent aim was to have art that was modern-looking in the eyes of western visitors but which also referenced local tradition. On the rooftop, meanwhile, the Skylark Lounge was 'a birdland paradise... with a panoramic view of the seven cities of Delhi.' (Oberoi Intercontinental brochure, 1968) The latter was contained in a structure with a wavy concrete roof – the crowning Corbusian reference in Bajpai, Mody and Colgan's very accomplished design.

CONCLUSION

The designs of the Intercontinental Hotel in Karachi and of the Oberoi Intercontinental in New Delhi reflect different hybridisations of national elites' aspirations to achieve images of modernity and American and international spatial

and aesthetic hegemonies. The Karachi Intercontinental's Islamic-inspired perforated cladding, selected by its American architects, demonstrated a desire to echo the hotel's locale for both practical and stylistic reasons. By contrast, the Oberoi Intercontinental's Corbusian-inspired brutalism was one of many instances of this aesthetic being selected in India as it was considered a signifier of postcolonial status and identity. In both instances, the hotels' interiors were hybrids of modernist planning, servicing and style with thematic design by American interior designers, who attempted also to reflect elements of the hotels' cultural locales. This approach followed a pattern typical of US-operated hotels around the world, the interiors of which contained references to the more 'exotic' elements of

European, Middle Eastern and Pacific Rim cultures. Viewed in a positive light, some of the designs might arguably be said to constitute an early and interesting body of 'globalised' design and decorative practice – albeit one viewing the world's visual cultures through an American filter and placing them at the service of commerce and hospitality. Designed for elite consumption, the hotels were primarily intended to attract specific clienteles who were wealthy, cosmopolitan and often very well-connected, but nonetheless they also spoke to wider, postcolonial aspirations. Such histories are of importance in helping to understand the modernist experience in post-independence Pakistan and India.

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