Evaluating the Significance of San Lorenzo Village, A Mid-20th Century Suburban Community

by Andrew Hope

San Lorenzo is an unincorporated, suburban community south of Oakland in the San Francisco Bay Area. Although a small settlement at San Lorenzo dates to the 19th century, nearly all of San Lorenzo's houses and most of the other buildings were constructed during the community's period of rapid growth between 1944 and 1958. The earliest phase of this growth, from 1944 through 1951, consisted of a new community, San Lorenzo Village, planned and built by developer David Bohannon. As initially developed by Bohannon, San Lorenzo Village included approximately 3,000 houses, as well as schools, churches, and commercial and civic buildings. Other developers expanded San Lorenzo Village to approximately twice its initial size until the supply of undeveloped land was exhausted in the late 1950s. The original portion of San Lorenzo Village appears to be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as an early prototypical example of a large-scale, postwar suburban housing development.(Figure 1)

Interstate 880, constructed in the early 1950s and subsequently widened, divides the community. Recently, the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) and the Federal Highway Administration developed plans to modify the freeway entrance and exit ramps in San Lorenzo, requiring compliance with several environmental laws and regulations, including Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act that requires federal agencies to consider the effects of their projects on historic properties. The initial step in complying with Section 106 includes surveying the area that may be affected by the project and identifying properties that may be eligible for listing in the National Register.

The historic property survey for the freeway project initially included fewer than 20 residences and a few modern, commercial properties adjacent to I-880 that would be directly affected by right-of-way acquisition for the freeway ramps. The residences were typical post-World War II suburban tract houses that initially did not appear to be historically or architecturally significant. However, further research revealed that the modest houses were part of a much larger district, San Lorenzo Village, and that the district is significant in the context of the area's mid-20th-century suburban growth. The survey report concluded that the San Lorenzo Village Historic District appears to be eligible for the National Register.

Postwar Suburbs and the Industrialization of Home Construction

During the first half of the 20th century, the housing construction industry comprised a large number of independent, small-scale builders. As late as 1938, the typical builder constructed no more than 4 single-family houses per year, with only a few builders capable of constructing as many as 10 houses per year.[1] The small scale of production paralleled comparably low demand in most regions of the United States, due to the difficulty of financing the pur-

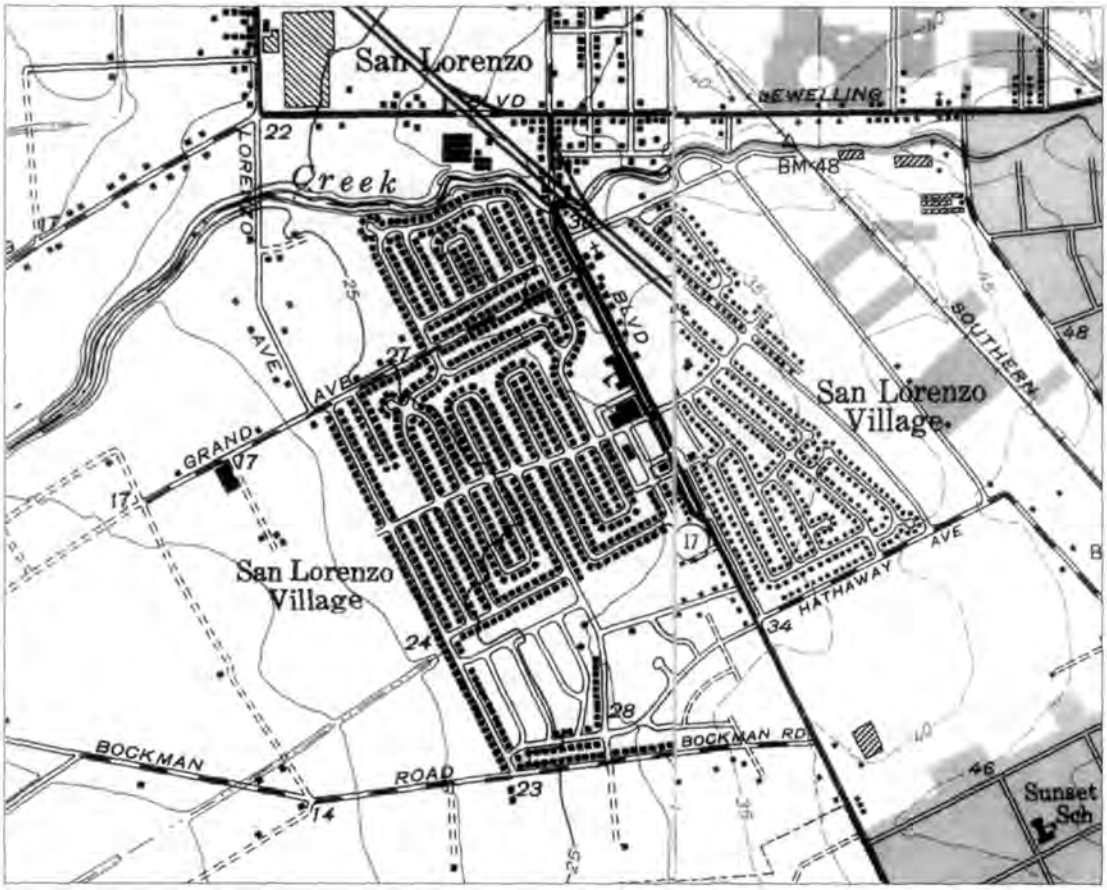

FIGURE 1
Bohannon's San Lorenzo Village, about half its ultimate size, is shown in this composite of the 1947 San Leandro and Hayward USGS maps. Additional housing was built to the south and east in the later 1940s and early 1950s.

chase of a single-family house. Lending institutions rarely financed more than 60 to 70 percent of the purchase price, with mortgages of 5 years or less that ended with a balloon payment.[2] These terms prevented much of the middle class and nearly all of the working class from buying homes, or required many years of patient saving prior to making a purchase.

The groundwork for altering this state of affairs began with the creation of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) in 1934. With two million construction workers without jobs, FHA initiated a program of mortgage guarantees to spur lenders to make more loans and thereby increase the rate of home construction and ownership. Although lending institutions embraced the program, little headway was made in stimulating the construction industry during the

Depression. The major catalyst for change came with the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly referred to as the "GI Bill," which included provisions for government mortgage guarantees of up to 100 percent of the purchase price. Lending institutions responded to FHA and Veterans Administration loan guarantees by dramatically reducing the down payment required and providing fixed-rate mortgages for much longer terms than had previously been considered prudent, to as much as 20 years. By the end of World War II, there was a tremendous pent-up demand for housing, due to a decade of economic stagnation preceding the war and the return of millions of soldiers to civilian life. With mechanisms for affordable financing in place, the building industry responded to the demand by constructing low-cost houses at a rate never before seen.

During the war, the Federal Government became a major customer in the housing market, constructing two million housing units for defense workers and their families near factories, arsenals, and shipyards.[3] In the San Francisco Bay Area, cities such as Oakland, Richmond, and Vallejo saw a huge influx of defense industry workers along with government programs to construct housing for them. In fact, the Bay Area was probably the largest recipient of federally funded wartime housing construction in the country.[4] Because the housing had to be constructed as quickly as possible, old methods of building one house at a time were clearly not sufficient.

A small number of builders responded by industrializing the home construction process and standardizing their product. Builders with experience in wartime housing construction were uniquely positioned to become large-scale housing developers after the war. These men were known as "operative builders," a term that referred to those who bought large tracts of land; installed streets, utilities, and other infrastructure; built the houses; and sold the finished houses as part of a new community. Operative builders came to dominate the postwar housing construction industry by building houses at an unprecedented rate and achieving economies of scale not previously seen in housing construction.

Housing developments by operative builders in the decades following the war were often characterized as assembly lines in which the workers moved rather than the product. The operative builders analyzed the construction process and divided it into discrete tasks assigned to different work crews. Each crew performed its assigned task repeatedly, moving from house to house, followed closely by the crew performing the next task. Crews were organized by the skill level appropriate to each task. Less experienced carpenters would do the rough wall framing, while the more experienced did more difficult roof framing, and the most experienced did finish work such as door and window casings.

One of the most important elements of the industrialized building process was pre-cutting lumber. Typically, a temporary sawmill would be set up at the construction site to fabricate the exact quantity and dimensions of lumber needed for the houses. All of the lumber needed to construct a single house could then be bundled and delivered to each building lot, eliminating the need for field cutting. Some of the largest operative builders, including Bohannon and William Levitt (developer of the Levittowns on the East Coast), acquired stands of timber in northern California, thereby securing a reliable source of materials. In addition to lumber, building components from bathtubs to doorknobs were purchased at volume discounts.

The industrialized building process originated in California, where it was applied to developments of unprecedented size, allowing large numbers of houses to be erected with remarkable speed. In particular, the use of temporary sawmills onsite and the bundling of complete sets of lumber and other materials for each house came to be known as the "California method."[5] By 1949, operative builders had become a major force in the housing market, with just 4 percent of all builders being responsible for 45 percent of new housing units.[6]

As one of the first of the operative builders, David Bohannon played a leading role in the development of mass production techniques. In 1939, Bohannon began the construction of Hillsdale, a residential and commercial development on the peninsula south of San Francisco. The plan for Hillsdale included single-family houses, apartments, and a shopping center. In the design of this new community, Bohannon was influenced by two communities developed in the 1920s: the Country Club District of Kansas City by J.C. Nichols and Hugh Potter's River Oaks community in Houston.[7] Each combined housing with shopping centers and recreational facilities.

With the suspension of construction at Hillsdale during World War II, Bohannon turned his attention to building houses for defense workers elsewhere in the Bay Area. His first big project was the construction of nearly 300 houses near San Jose in 1941, a development that Bohannon completed in just 9 months. This was followed by the construction of more than 500 houses for shipyard workers in the city of Napa in 1942. Having refined his mass-production techniques with these two projects, Bohannon then built 700 3-bedroom houses in Richmond for workers at the Kaiser shipyards, completing the project in the remarkable time of just 4 months, between early May and early September 1943.[8]

Bohannon began the construction of San Lorenzo Village in 1944. While initially housing many defense workers, neither the Federal Government nor the defense industries were involved in the project as clients. Rather, the project was a speculative venture that responded to immediate needs and anticipated

FIGURE 2
This aerial view of a portion of San Lorenzo Village was taken ca. 1950 as the street trees were beginning to mature. The buildings at the upper right are part of a later tract by another developer. (Courtesy of the Hayward Area Historical Society)

the postwar demand for affordable housing. Bohannon acquired 350 acres of farmland in the unincorporated area between San Leandro and Hayward and built nearly 1,500 houses in 1944 and 1945.[9] (Figure 2)

Bohannon set up a temporary sawmill on the construction site to fabricate 2 by 4s and other lumber as needed. The lumber was then assembled into wall panels with framed openings for doors and windows, and a complete set of panels was delivered to each lot. Although factory production of wall panels is more common in housing construction today, this was an innovation in the 1940s. A central mixing plant and reusable forms allowed concrete to be poured at the rate of 25 house foundations and 1,000 feet of sidewalks and curbs per day. At the peak of the operation as many as 2,500 workers were involved in the building of the new community.[10] Bohannon constructed an average of more than 400 houses per year from 1944 through 1951, far beyond the rate of even the largest builders of the prewar period.

Community Planning and Design

Operative builders were also called "community builders," whose developments went beyond the scale of previous subdivision construction and constituted entirely new communities. The new housing developments were often located well beyond the city limits or the older streetcar suburbs, in unincorporated areas without zoning regulations. As a result, community builders often acted as planners in the absence of government planning,

FIGURES 3a AND 3b
Built in 1944-45, these two houses (upper left and right) have the same plan but different roof forms.

FIGURE 4
The corner window lends this 1947 house (lower left) a touch of modernity.

FIGURE 5
The 1948 model house (lower right) featured a large picture window on the facade.

(All courtesy of the author)

working out forms that came to be considered standards for developments. While community builders were primarily interested in constructing houses and commercial buildings that would bring a return on their investment, they also had to plan for facilities such as schools, churches, parks, libraries, and fire stations.

In addition to planning for a variety of land uses, community builders developed new street layouts, abandoning the rectilinear grids of earlier urban and suburban neighborhoods. Curved streets, looping streets, and the short cul-de-sac were all used extensively in this period. In addition to aesthetic considerations, the primary motive was to make residential streets safer, especially for children, by reducing the speed and volume of through traffic. The new type of street plan can be seen in San Lorenzo Village, where only 6 of the 86 streets in the historic district intersect with Hesperian Boulevard, the main traffic artery through the district. Twenty of the streets are cul-de-sacs, and another 23 are short connector streets with intersections only at their ends. The entire district includes just 124 intersections, substantially less than would be found in a development of the same size laid out in a traditional grid pattern. While curved and looping streets were built in suburban housing developments since the designs of Frederick Law Olmsted in the 19th century, they proliferated in the decades following World War II not only in the more expensive neighborhoods, but in tracts of modest houses intended for first-time home buyers.(Figures 3a and 3b, Figure 4, and Figure 5)

Mel Scott noted the significance of San Lorenzo Village as a prototype for new suburban communities in his 1985 book, *The San Francisco Bay Area: A Metropolis in Perspective*—

San Lorenzo Village, begun by the David D. Bohannon Organization in 1944 in the area south of San Leandro, was a forerunner of the scores of new "planned communities" of almost identical houses. A whole new town in itself, it housed approximately five thousand people and had its own shopping center, schools, and recreation facilities. In its planning it was, however, superior to many later ventures in large-scale construction of low-cost houses, because the street system at least included service roads paralleling a main highway (which unfortunately sliced through the development) and the interior streets were designed to assure as much safety and convenience as possible.

In many of the other speculative developments built in the immediate postwar years, when returning veterans were taking full advantage of the home-purchasing provisions of legislation enacted during the war, the street layouts were not so carefully planned, and no sites were set aside for needed schools and playgrounds.[11]

David Bohannon became the first president of the National Association of Home Builders, founded in 1941, and was a longtime member of the Community Builders Council, founded in 1942 as a subgroup of the Urban Land Institute.[12] The Community Builders Council began publishing the *Community Builders Handbook* in 1947, which codified the planning and design principles of the postwar housing developers. Annual issues of the *Handbook* frequently quoted Bohannon and cited his projects. As a result, the design features that appeared in San Lorenzo Village in the late 1940s became the design standards for subsequent housing developments nationwide.

Significance of San Lorenzo Village's Buildings

National Register criteria state that a property may be eligible for listing as an historic district if it "represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction." The houses of San Lorenzo Village are stylistically conservative and conventional in their design and materials, but are representative of their type and period and collectively convey the immediate postwar era.

The industrialization of the building process led to uniformity of the finished product. All of the nearly 1,500 houses constructed in the first phase of the project utilized the same floor plan, with variety achieved through such techniques as reversing the plan, alternating hipped and gabled roofs, and varying the window locations and exterior paint colors. The single-story, 3-bedroom houses were slightly less than 1,000 square feet, and sold for $6,000.[13] One of

the bedrooms had a door leading directly to the outside, so that this room could be rented if not needed by the family. Several different designs were used in the project's subsequent years, but all of the houses built in a year had the same floor plan. Thus, while the house form varied from one neighborhood to the next, all of the houses within a neighborhood were of the same design.

Distinctive characteristics of the houses include their small size, compact plans, and the absence of large porches, all reflecting the priority given to minimizing construction costs. All of the houses were a single story, with one-car garages. Exterior materials included stucco and different types of wood siding, with one-piece, lift-up garage doors. Decorative features were limited to geometric patterns of wood trim on the garage doors and on panels between the facade windows. The designs provided for direct access to the rear yard from the living room or dining area, which, along with the small front porches, reflect the period's emphasis away from the street and public life and towards family life and private outdoor space.

Although the houses at San Lorenzo are not architecturally distinguished, they collectively form a significant ensemble. The historic character of the district is further enhanced by the fact that all three of the schools, three of the churches, and the largest of the commercial buildings recognizably date to the same period as the houses. Two buildings in particular stand out as significant examples of the period's architecture: the Lorenzo Theater and the San Lorenzo Community Church. The Lorenzo Theater, a streamline-moderne movie house built in 1947, features a tall sign pylon above the corner marquee that serves as a landmark for the community. The San Lorenzo Community Church, designed by the architect Bruce Goff during the war for nearby Camp Parks, incorporates a World War II Quonset Hut for the sanctuary. After the war, the Quonset Hut was sold to the present congregation, dismantled, and reassembled at its current location.(Figure 6)

FIGURE 6
The San Lorenzo Community Church was constructed in the late 1940s from a World War II surplus Quonset Hut. (Courtesy of the author)

Integrity

In order to be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, a property must possess integrity. This does not mean that a property must be in its original, unaltered state, but it must retain enough of its historic appearance and original material to convey its historic character and significance. In evaluating an historic district, the typical approach is to assess the integrity of each building and determine whether it is contributing or non-contributing to the district. A building constructed after the district's period of significance, or that has been so altered that it no longer conveys its historic character, would be non-contributing. In order for the district as a whole to convey its historical significance, a substantial majority of individual buildings must be contributing.

Almost all of the houses within the proposed San Lorenzo Village Historic District were constructed between 1944 and 1951, although most have been modified to some degree over the half-century since construction. Other buildings within the district, which date to the same period and retain a high degree of integrity, include the community center, fire station, and movie theater, as well as three churches and three schools. Later non-contributing buildings include the library, post office, and three other churches. In addition, most of the existing commercial buildings date to the 1970s and 1980s, although two of the commercial buildings date to the mid-1940s. The original Bohannon plan, concentrating commercial buildings on Hesperian Boulevard, has been maintained.

The great majority of the buildings within the proposed San Lorenzo Village Historic District are single-family houses. Evaluating their integrity was problematic, because making individual judgments about each of the approximately 3,000 houses would have been an enormous undertaking. Instead, a sampling technique was used to gather information on a small number of houses, which would enable generalizations about the integrity of the district as a whole. While this methodology would probably not be sufficient for a National Register nomination, it was considered sufficient to establish the presence of an eligible district for the purpose of Section 106 compliance.

The sample included 10 houses in a row from each of 14 locations selected from a map of the district without prior knowledge of the houses at each location. The 14 locations were evenly distributed throughout throughout the district and included houses spanning the entire construction period. Each of the 140 houses in the sample was surveyed, and alterations visible from the front sidewalks were noted. A majority of the houses have at least one replacement window on the facade. In most cases, the original window frames have been retained, with new vinyl-clad or aluminum sash replacing the original wood sash. Forty-two percent of the garage doors in the sample (57 of 135) are replacements. Surprisingly, in only one house has the garage been converted to additional living space. Twenty-two percent of the houses (31 of 140) have replacement roofs of wood rather than

FIGURE 7
This moderately altered house has replacement windows, stone veneer on the facade, and a garage converted to additional living space. (Courtesy of the author)

FIGURE 8
The original form of this substantially altered house has been obscured by later additions, and no original material is visible. (Courtesy of the author)

asphalt shingles, and one house has a replacement clay tile roof. About one-quarter of the houses has a masonry veneer added to the facade, usually as a wainscot between grade and the window sills. Of the 36 houses with masonry veneer, 34 are brick and 2 are stone or imitation stone products. Thirteen of the houses have new wood siding (such as T-111 plywood), which differs in appearance from the original wood siding, and three have aluminum siding. Seven houses have been resurfaced in stucco, with a more noticeable texture than the smooth finish of the unaltered stucco houses. Thirteen houses have additions on the front, and two others have second story additions at the rear. The additions range from an enclosed front porch to more substantial enlargements.

Following the survey, the 140 houses in the sample were sorted into 4 categories: unaltered, slightly altered, moderately altered, and substantially altered. A house might be considered slightly altered if, for example, the only changes were the addition of a brick wainscot to the facade and a new garage door. Moderately altered houses could still be recognized as dating to the era of their original construction, but have had several minor alterations, possibly combined with a more substantial alteration such as the enclosure of the front porch. Substantially altered houses show extensive changes to the fenestration, second-story additions, etc. Generally, substantially altered houses could no longer be recognized as dating to the era of their original construction. (Figure 7 and Figure 8) Nineteen of the houses in the sample (13 percent) appeared to be unaltered, and another 92 houses (66 percent) only slightly altered, 14 houses (10 percent) fell into the "moderately altered" category, and the remaining 15 houses (11 percent) exhibited substantial alterations.

Based on sampling results, the dividing line between contributing and non-contributing buildings falls somewhere within the "moderately altered" group, with all of the "substantially altered" houses and most of the "moderately altered" houses being non-contributing. At least 80 percent of the houses in the district appear to be contributing, a more than sufficient proportion for the district as a whole to convey its historical significance. In addition to the sampling, a windshield survey of the entire district appeared to confirm that the 140 houses surveyed in the integrity sample were representative of the whole district.

Conclusion

The Historic Architecture Survey Report for the San Lorenzo Village Historic District was transmitted to the California State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) in 2002, with a request for concurrence regarding eligibility of the district and other historic properties. The report concluded that San Lorenzo Village is significant as one of the earliest of the Bay Area's postwar planned communities, and for its pioneering role in the application of mass-production techniques to house construction. The district is also significant for its association with David Bohannon, one of the most influential community builders of the postwar period. The district's houses and other buildings exhibit the distinctive character of their type and period, and the community as a whole conveys a strong sense of the postwar era, in spite of alterations to individual houses.

Because of the size of the district and its unusual nature, SHPO staff requested a tour with Caltrans staff to visually confirm whether the district conveys its historic significance and possesses sufficient integrity for National Register listing. Discussions during and after the tour revealed that SHPO staff had a more negative view of the district's integrity, and there was no consensus on the National Register eligibility of the district. The SHPO staff's more skeptical view of the proposed district was due in part to the high proportion of houses that exhibited at least some alterations, and in part to a higher threshold for the degree of alteration that an individual house could exhibit and still be considered contributing to the district. Particular objection was made to the introduction of materials, such as brick, that were not part of the development's original materials palette.

Subsequent to the site tour with the SHPO staff, a reduction in the scope of the freeway project eliminated the need to acquire additional right-of-way adjacent to the freeway. The redesigned project had no potential to affect the proposed historic district, and therefore no formal response from the SHPO was needed or received on the question of the district's eligibility.

The tour revealed that the integrity of the proposed historic district had diminished noticeably in the two years since the survey effort began. The integrity of the district will undoubtedly continue to diminish as property owners continue to alter their houses. The San Lorenzo Village Homes Association, which enforces deed covenants and has authority over exterior alterations to the houses, prohibited the construction of second-story additions for more than 40 years. However, amid growing concerns that San Lorenzo was becoming a community of retirees, the homeowners' association lifted the prohibition about 15 years ago in an attempt to attract more young families with children.[14] More second-story additions are likely, as the original houses are considered too small by today's standards.

While alterations to the houses are inevitable, the significance of San Lorenzo Village lies as much in its overall planning as in the architectural qualities of the individual buildings.[15] The distinctive character of the district derives in part from its street layout and the planning for schools, churches, and other community facilities. Physical features that distinguish San Lorenzo Village from later neighboring developments include the relatively narrow streets with mountable curbs, and the now-mature trees. Later subdivisions in the area generally have wider, straighter streets with square curbs, and a substantially lower investment in landscaping.

As more postwar housing tracts are considered for National Register eligibility and listing, the issue of assessing their integrity will become more urgent. Lacking consensus about the appropriate level of integrity for this type of property, these historically important properties may remain unprotected and underrepresented in the National Register of Historic Places.

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Notes

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3. Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the American Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 242.

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6. Weiss, 161.

7. "Big Dave Bohannon," 146.

8. "Big Dave Bohannon," 190.

9. "Big Dave Bohannon," 190.

10. "Big Dave Bohannon," 145.

11. Mel Scott, *The San Francisco Bay Area: A Metropolis in Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 273.

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14. Doris Marciel, San Lorenzo resident and local historian, personal communication, January 18, 2005.

15. Richard Longstreth addresses this point in "The Extraordinary Post-War Suburb," *Forum Journal* (Fall 2000): 16-25.

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