Sonic Architecture and the Creation of Space
Approaches to Dīkshitar’s Brhadīśvaram Kriti and the Brhadīśvara Temple in Tañjāvūr
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Introduction: A Subject, An Object, A Relationship
Musical forms, like architectural structures, can describe our experience of spatial relationships. Our study will demonstrate this through a particular musical construction of the Carnatic (South Indian) tradition that is further enhanced by the composer’s religious perspective. The piece is a composition (“kriti”) by Muthusvāmy Dīkshitar (1775-1835) entitled “Brhadīśvaram.” The title refers to a particular temple, the Rajarajesvara Temple in Tañjāvūr, Tamilnadu, also known as the “Brhadīśvara Temple.” Our purpose here is to consider Dīkshitar’s profoundly Tantric conception of space and relationships in this kriti and see how the musical structure both mirrors and embodies the creation of temple spaces delineated by the relationships of the worshippers to the Divine. It is clearly reasonable to perform such examinations through the windows of musicology, religion, or anthropology, but we should also open up the possibilities for other disciplinary engagements that can perform comparative or supportive functions. Among these paradigms there is a commonality: each seeks to reconcile, address, or otherwise elucidate on the relationship between the subject and the object; the perceiver and the perceived. Since this commonality aims at the heart of the matter, we will treat these paradigms as possible windows through which to examine this composition. It is the hope of this paper to make a reasonable case for such a comparative approach to understanding the relationships and spaces within “Brhadīśvaram”.

Let us begin our work with one of these models in order to create a framework from which to place some useful ideas.

Creation of Space: The Metaphor of Architecture
Architecture is the creation of space. The physical materials we think of when we think of architecture are only carefully formed metaphorical devices. For how else can we define space? When we look at a landscape, we see something versus something else; a duality between what we consider tangible and that which is everything else. The “everything else” is that which we notice but cannot describe. Architectural forms are constructed frames around these ineffable spaces. By making such structures, we make the indescribable approachable.

But there is yet another important feature of architecture that is of utmost importance in our examination of Dīkshitar’s composition. This feature, the relationship of perceiver to the perceived, is in fact the very motivation of cognizable architecture and defines its structural relationships. As the philosopher Martin Heidegger wrote, “The bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream…It does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream.”

In Heidegger’s view, it is the disconnected elements of the natural world that is re-cognized (they “emerge”) as elements of the architecture when the architecture takes its particular form.

If we consider architecture not as the building of structures but as the creation of cognizable space, we are also given a useful perspective in which to examine Dīkshitar’s remarkable skills as both a performer and as a Tantrika. For, as we will see, the delineation of space is a particularization of experience that is crucial to the Tantric perspective.

The Hindu Temple: Monument of manifestation...
The gargantuan task of ascertaining the meaning of the numerous aesthetic elements in and around the Hindu temple would not be productive here. Yet it should suffice to say that as with most aspects of Hinduism, there is very little that can be done to extricate the religious from the mundane. It can be safely asserted that the Hindu temple holds a prominent place in the social and religious milieu of India, and that it is a regular feature of existence for Hindus.

We can also assert that there would most likely be a deeper significance of Hindu temples to the devotees whose lives were intertwined with its existence. Depending on the devotee’s particular understanding, the Hindu temple fulfilled many roles on many levels. Stella Kramrisch, in her book The Hindu Temple, touches on this idea: “The temple is the concrete shape of the Essence; as such it is the residence and vesture of God. The masonry is the sheath (kosa) and body. The
temple is the monument of manifestation.”

This is an elegant passage that does not miss the point that there is more to the Hindu temple than its visible architecture; but the visible architecture is that which presents the means to appreciate its depth. Let us look at an example of this approach in an article on a particular sculptured element of Hindu temples. M.A. Dhaky writes that “…the bhutas (elementals) or, more precisely, bhutanayakas (captains of the elementals)… represent more than the five elements; they personify the elemental fragments of creation, infinite in number.”

He then elaborates further on their meanings:
The bhutas (or bhutanayakas) and ganas (or gananayakas) on Saiva temples transfer the perception of the subjective-objective reality of Creator-Creation or Causation-Causality to a tangible plane, through the symbolism of their concrete imagery.

If there is this much complexity and depth to the consideration of a temple’s simpler elemental features, it is not difficult to see why philosophical and metaphysical elaboration might have been rightly relegated to the domain of the Tantric or Yogi. This is not to say that such understandings were out of reach for everyone else, however. What we will now examine is how a devotee’s conception of the divine is informed by their relationship to the temple.

**The Temple and Me: Approach and Consideration of Relationships**

Looking far ahead to the edge of the village; the rising sun causes a boldness of colors to burst from the natural landscape, and a devotee sees the familiar shape of the temple as it punctures the sky. The devotee apprehends the horizon and the shape made where the earth meets the sky. The temple is as natural and evident as the trees and hills, and for the time they are all one singular expression of Brahman. The devotee walks with a quick but focused pace, heading up the road to the temple complex. It looms larger as he nears; his footsteps mingle with the other footsteps that dance around his own. And soon he is standing in front of the entrance, as close as he can get before going inside.

He notices the tarnished statues of Śiva Nataraja and Tripura Sundari and many others, his eyes roam across the contours of the temple and rise up with its many levels. The shapes and colors and textures are creating an overwhelming sensation; they demand his action. He must enter the temple or else he must leave. As he crosses the threshold, the world of the vibrant sun and of the temple shape have collapsed into a new set of experiences. The devotee is where he is supposed to be and doing what he is supposed to do. As he performs his puja, he is aware that he is truly inside and that it is here where he can experience the promises of the temple. His puja finished, he re-emerges from the temple and enters the world again, startled by the action around him. He regains his compose and travels forth into the outer; into the world of actions and people until at last he watches the sunset over the temple and how natural it all looks.

The above was included to illustrate something important about the temple: it gains different consideration and different meanings as the devotee approaches and as the devotee exits. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas said in an interview, “Human experience is not some self-transparent substance or pure cogito; it is always intending or tending towards something in the world which preoccupies it.”

Humans, then, are perpetually motivated to re-establish (re-cognize) their relationships with the world around them (and as we will see, within them as well). The temple establishes a useful model to examine just what these relationships are and how they may be established and maintained.

In the fictional devotee story above, there appear to be four distinct phases that occur in his perception. Actually, there are only three. The fourth experience, when he re-emerges, is a continuation of the third phase and merely starts the process all over again. So how are these phases considered? Let us examine them now in more detail.

**Phase One: Unity**

Those who saw the temple from a distance consensually perceived it as a Single Entity, the Purusa or Universal Self who is reality (sat), Consciousness (cit), and Infinite Bliss (ananda); who is also beyond sky or space… The temple in the distance is unobtainable; an impression. But it is a natural feature of the landscape, which is all one organic whole. The distant temple is a space where the seemingly infinite potential meanings outweigh any particular assumptions. It remains ineffable and unreachable.

**Phase Two: Plurality**

Those who viewed the temple at close quarters saw in its organization and its stratified divisions, its details, voids, and masses, the embodiment of Prakriti or Nature—Cosmos, Creation, Manifest, or Empirical Reality—with its interminable, though coherent, amalgam of tangible and intangible, seen and unseen, sensed and unsensed verities.

It is in this phase that we come to understand bhakti. The distance between devotee and temple is no longer one of unity; it has become a duality. Here the confrontation with the temple emphasizes the issue of separation, because there is no synthesis of the inner with the outer. There is always the distance between the subject and object, no matter how much contact there may be. In a sense, one can only get close to the temple; one cannot internalize the temple and thus a crisis occurs. The crisis forces one to negotiate a relationship with the Divine.

Consequently, it is only when one term of the dialectic is upset that the part usually played by both terms becomes visible, revealing simultaneously that direct power which the world holds over our body and the reciprocal power which the body has in anchoring itself in a world, in demanding ‘certain preferential planes’.

The temple’s entrance, as a threshold, is also seen as a boundary: “A boundary may also be understood as a threshold, that is, an embodiment of a difference.” And as a boundary, it implies selectivity and further forces a negotiation: “Perhaps the time/place of the templum is the time/place of a threshold that cannot be crossed or erased: something like an invisible sieve…a filter that allows the eye to see.”

Yet it is precisely the power of a boundary that creates
the motivational tension necessary to experience something. Heidegger states: “A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that, from which something begins its presencing.”

Phase Three: Transcendence and Re-Cognition

There is an implicit relation between revelation and concealment upon crossing the threshold, which becomes solidified as an explicit relation when the temple is reconsidered by the devotee from inside. Here, the duality between inner and outer temple is resolved. However, once inside the temple, an even deeper negotiation of relationship between temple and devotee occurs. What is at stake is the experience itself, whereas in Phase Two what was at stake was the nominal form of the relationship.

The inner metaphors create particular experiences of space, and the devotee recognizes that the temple, with its great immensity of space, becomes metaphor in order to reveal its deepest secrets. It also becomes fully tangible in order to resolve the problem of subject and object. As Dhaky writes, “They seem inspired by a vision, directly perceived by the senses, of the prasada, or temple as a concrete symbol of both the dualism and monism of all that exists and of the ultimate which subsists…”

It is vital that the devotee realize the ineffable in the tangible form of the temple, but it is even more important that the devotee internalize this revelation.

...the unity of experience can no longer be considered to lie ‘out there’ or ‘in here’ but must, rather, originate in that dynamic relationship between body-subject and world through which ‘objects’ and ‘subjects’ come into being for us.

The experience must be personalized and particular, giving the devotee the full awareness of his existence both in the temple and outside the temple:

In itself, it is present in the inconspicuousness of things at hand being taken care of by a circumspection absorbed in them for that circumspection. Space is initially discovered in this spatiality with being-in-the-world. On the basis of the spatiality thus discovered, space itself becomes accessible to cognition.

So what we find is that the temple is not just the external object, it is also the very relationship between the subject and the object, as well as the considerations of this relationship and the roles imparted:

Instead of a mechanistic deterministic relationship of causality, we have an organic relation of motivation between subject and world, such that the body possesses the world in a certain way while gearing itself to that world.

The Kriti and Me: Approach and Consideration of Relationships

Turning to the structure of the Kriti form, of which the Carnatic composer and musician Muthusvāmy Dīkshitar was a master, we are confronted with perspectives and considerations that are analogous to those shown in the previous section on temples.

The kriti, in general, has three parts (angas): Pallavi, Anupallavi, and Charanam. A brief comparison may suffice to show how the relationships between devotee and the temple as expressed earlier are found within the kriti structure.

The Pallavi (“sprout; bud”) is a simple statement usually introducing the contemplation of the supreme divine presence in the kriti. In comparison with perception of the temple form, the pallavi begins as the outward temple seen from a distance and is oriented towards a single, broad experience of the Divine in a superlative form and within a broad space in which all is contemplated as one organic whole.

The Anupallavi illustrates the relationship with the Divine; it tells us what is at stake and provides the definition of a relationship between the worshipper and the worshipped. This is the temple experience up close, when devotees are recognized in the relationship, and we find an emphasis on the plurality of temple details. There is a new delineation of space as being the connection between the devotee and the Divine. The devotional contract is established.

Finally, in the Charanam, the action is detailed and the instructions are unfolded; it becomes the place of real secrets and real revelation. Returning to the perception of the temple, the Charanam is the point where the temple is entered and worship is performed. It is here that the method of experiencing the divine is shown to be personal and particular. The space is now delineated from the inside out; from the inward experience to the outward.

Now that we have a simple understanding of this form, we can examine the “Brhadīśvaram” kriti in more detail in order to plunge deeper into its meanings.

Dīkshitār’s Re-Creation of Space: The Metaphor of the Brhadīśvaram Kriti

The Rajarajesvāra Śaivite Temple in Tañjāvūr, also known as the “Brhadīśvaram Temple,” is considered one of the greatest built during the Middle Chola period around the 11th century. The temple is of a massive, but unusual, design which seems to emphasize the contemplation of spaces. There are three perimeters within the temple; the first is the outer temple entrance to the east, next is the middle perimeter and finally to the great lingam itself in the center. It evokes an experience unlike any other temple.

Dīkshitar certainly visited the temple, as is clear by the five kritis which are named for this temple. Of these four, one, Brhadīśvaram, provides a rather elegant glimpse into Dīkshitar’s Tantric play. And though his compositions often detail the theological and ritual aspects of a temple, the physical descriptions of its presiding deities, or the particular architectural form of the temple itself, an elaboration of those aspects are not the subject of this paper.

In order to create an appropriate analysis, we will need to examine a number of important elements that are relevant to the larger understanding of this kriti and its play of creation. First, we will briefly discuss the concept of “sound” in Indian theology.

Sound and Music: Nada Brahman

Architecture is not about building structures, it’s about creating space. The “space” is always there, of course, and always has been there. By “creating” it, we are actually “re-creating” it. In the process of delineating it physically, we are materially manifesting everything
that space is not. Yet, in doing so, we can impart the experience of what space may be. In the same way, music can be seen as creating a cognition of the Nada-Brahman (The Divine or Causal Sound, which is the source of all). But Nada-Brahman has always been there. By “creating” music, Dikshitar is “re-creating” it. He is describing everything that Nada-Brahmin is not by delineating it through a limited, impermanent form. Yet in doing so, his music can impart the experience of Nada-Brahman. According to Lewis Rowell:

"Sound, according to the testimony of Sarngadeva, is manifested, not caused, and the sounds that are uttered represent only one category among its many manifestations. By sound the gods exist, with sound they are worshipped, and the entire world process of continuous creation and dissolution subsists by means of sound."

The musician, who is not an object in this cognitive field but is undifferentiated from this field (hence the anonymity aspect of Carnatic music), does not create music, music creates itself through him; through his pulsation. Music is subsumed within the causal vibration of the universe.

Again we refer to Rowell: “Sound...is one, universal, eternal, causal (but not caused), permeating both personal and transpersonal consciousness, and manifested along the human pathway from inner to outer space."^8

Dikshitar’s idealization of spatiality in the kriti is evident in the relationships he presents and the approach to the divine in each anga of the kriti:

**Pallavi**

In the pallavi, Dikshitar presents space that is untenable, infinite, and ineffable. It is, like the distant temple, undifferentiated. He implores, “O Mind”, though he seems to be implying the Mind that is at One with the great lord. For he immediately invokes the superlative: “great lord” (Brhadiśvaram), worshipped by deities (i.e., out of the realm of human experience). The text of the pallavi reads:

Oh Mind! Sing the praises of Lord BRHADIŚVARA, who is worshipped by BRAHMA, INDRA and others.

The pallavi begins at the beginning of the kriti, but what else? The temple is called “Brhadiśvara” as is the great linga in the center of this vast temple. Dikshitar approaches the temple in two ways here: it is both the outer temple heading inward and the inner linga, the bhija, heading outward. The reference to Brahma and Indra (and others) is also dual. First, they are among the images in the central portion of the temple which houses the linga, the garbhagriha, and may indicate an outward heading perspective from the point of view of the linga center. But they may also refer to the inner reflection of the great lord from the outer world of bhakti and worship; Brahma, Indra and others reflect the outer world where the gods and men are separated until united inside. The spaces and relationships are pulsing inwardly and outwardly.

A SriVidya tantrika (as we will learn later) would also find mantric (the recitation of sacred words/sounds) significance with these names, though that is best left to initiates in their particular cult. One other possible significance comes from the use of Indra in the passage and may be making a reference to the so-called talu-cakra in Hatha-Yoga, which is the birthplace of Indra and resides in the upper palate, where the tongue is placed to prevent energy from spilling out."^9 This would further enhance the idea that the pallavi relates to the head.

Finally, we might also note that the first word of the Sanskrit lyrics, “brhadisvaram” is broken up musically as “brhadi” and “svaram”. The “brhadi” is interesting because it also contains the name of the tala, which is adi (which means “first”). The “svaram” are the names/sounds of the song. One could speculate that Dikshitar is beginning the song from the infinite Great Lord (Brahma) by opening up the sonic component of raga (referring to the svaram) and tala.

**Anupallavi**

In the anupallavi, we are presented with space that creates the immediate need for choice; enforced plurality through intimacy. There is a determined space that identifies nominal relationships. Space determines what you have and do not have and what you can have or ca not have (hence the reference to Samsara). As E. Valentine Daniel asserts, quoting from Peirce, “Doubt is ‘an uneasy
and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves.”

Simply put, the crisis of approach in the anupallavi (where the temple requires negotiation) is the crisis of samsara. The anupallavi text reads:

He, who delights the heart of BRHANNAYAKI, is adept at annihilating the fear of SAMSARA from the hearts of devotees.

The reference to Brhannayaki, the great crowd of captains and queens, may serve to reinforce the position of devotees’ relationship to the temple. It is interesting that samsara is rooted in longing for something that you do not have (or having what you do not want) and in the anupallavi we are surrounding the temple, which serves as the “heart”.

The Nayaka were also members of the 17th century dynasty in Tanjevur who were known as patrons of the arts. Could Dīkshitar be referring to them as well? For a patron of the arts is usually not the one performing the art; that is, they support what they can no longer do themselves.

**Charanam**

In the charanam portion of the kriti, Dīkshitar sings of the particular methods for apprehending the divine, but the last two lines narrow the methods into his own personal experience and culminate in the Viddudhi cakra, the cakra of purification and of sound, and finally explode back outward towards a re-conception of the universe as manifestation of the play of Siva. Here we find space as experience (object) and space that is experienced (subject) simultaneously; all things are only one particular thing that converges to this point. The charanam text reads:

He, whose feet are worshipped by distinguished sages, is adroit in bestowing on His devotees both ephemeral and eternal joy simultaneously; worshipped by the King of the serpents; is established in the NAGADHVANI, NADA, BINDU and KALA. He is adored and attended on by GURUGUHA and is the creator of this marvelous, diversified world of names and forms. He, established in the VISUDDHICAKRA, is the primordial cause of the creation of the universe. The whole of creation is a sport for him.

We can contemplate the conspicuous elements of “Nagadhvani, Nada, Bindu, and Kala” by considering their meanings first and then discerning what relationships they denote. Nagadhvani is the name of the raga used in the kriti (dhvani means “poetic expression”, and naga may refer to the “ascetic”). This raga is rare and is appropriate with this unique (rare) temple. Nada is the source (from the word for “river”) and can be seen as the central channel. The Bindu is the seed, the point from where it all begins. Kala, time, may refer to the manifestation of action outward. What the text seems to be saying is that the Great Lord manifests in the raga through the channel leading from the bindu, set forth by the plurality created by Sakti. All of this manifestation comes about through the Vissudhi Cakra, and thus it becomes personalized, for it is Dīkshitar’s (as Siva) Vissudhi Cakra which holds this property and then propels it outward through song.

**Theological Implications: Tantric Creations**

What is our justification for declaring that Dīkshitar’s compositions create a form of “sonic architecture”, a manifestation of the divine just as the temple architecture is a manifestation of Śiva’s desire to experience himself? Our defense rests on the composer’s religious path, which above all informs his musical compositions: the path of the SriVidya tantrika.

Although a simple definition of Tantra, and of SriVidya, would be beyond the scope of this paper as well, we can provide some general statements so we have somewhere to start. It should be noted that our elaboration of the theological implications of this particular kriti will provide a much better way to understand the Tantric perspective.

Tantra comes from the verbal root “tan”, meaning “to expand.” In the words of Georg Feuerstein, the word “Tantra” can be seen as “the expansive, all-encompassing Reality revealed by wisdom” and denotes the pulsation between the revealed and the concealed as a play by which liberation is experienced. Tantras will argue for a God that is exactly your experiences. After “realization,” you still wake up to the world! Epiphanies are forgotten; tantrikas want to be able to keep the awakened insight.

What is SriVidya? It is the living embodiment of Goddess-oriented Tantra otherwise referred to as Sakta Tantra. According to Douglas Brooks, “Sakta Tantrism can be imagined as a river of concepts and practices formed by the convergence of tributaries.”

SriVidya is one of those junctures where Kashmir Shaivism and Sakta Tantrism converge. It is a Goddess-worship tradition known to be the cult of Lalitha Tripurasundari (“Beautiful Goddess of the Three Cities”, a reference from the Puranas). The “Tripara” has deeper, triadic implications that are evident in Dīkshitar’s compositions. There is a focus around the image of the Sri Cakra as representing the expansion and contraction of the cosmos. SriVidya, which places paramount emphasis on mantra, relies on initiation to continue its lineage and its deeper wisdom. It is considered the living link to the Trika traditions, whose practice and philosophy is to be found in Abhinavagupta’s “Tantraloka”, written around 1000 c.e.

The central realization of this philosophy is the experience of freedom that is the play of Śiva. Śiva...
is completely free from bondage and is all “One.” But without bondage, there can be no way for Śiva to experience freedom and so he manifests through Sakti, who is his consort and the energy of all creation and action. Thus, music is Sakti and the keepers of music (i.e., gurus) are mimetic to Śiva; the dynamism of Sakti gives them their re-cognition as Śiva. We will return to this concept later.

The compositions of Dīkshitar, an initiative of ŚriVidya, cannot help but present themselves as both inviting and yet full of obstacles, for paradox creates power and this is crucial to Tantra. We should be cautious about dismissing his music as unnecessarily complex or overly religious, for the theological principles are not compromised by his Tantric approach, nor is the aesthetic beauty of his music compromised by its apparent subservience to Tantric philosophy. The complexity of his kritis is a complexity of particularities, for the music always appears at the precise point where secrets are revealed only to conceal more secrets. Suspension of paradox is the hallmark of Tantric philosophy. Further, even in the form of the kriti itself and in the purely musical virtuosity of his compositions Dīkshitar manages to re-create the experience of the divine. As Harold S. Powers states in his article on “Musical Art and Esoteric Theism:”

...however much one’s attention may focus on the outward meaning of the songs, thence on to their esoteric allusions, soon enough the semantics begins to be overshadowed by the pure sound of the words, which take on independent life as carriers of musical rhythms and shapes...“

In a Tantric sense, Dīkshitar is also aware of the mimetic relationship of the kriti and such cosmological ideas as the phases of the moon, the qualities of the planets, and even on the more practical nature of meditative breathing and contemplation. Therefore, it is probable that he would also be aware of the mimetic nature of the kriti and the architectural form of the temple for which he composed. The temple is a physical embodiment of outward dualism and inward monism; in other words, Brahman (in other words, Śiva). Although the space can be experienced in many ways, the tantrika can experience the temple as himself. To re-experience himself as the temple, he must draw on his inner shakti energy into manifestation. Dēkshitar’s kriti places Dēkshitar in the fluctuating role of temple and Śiva, or music and Shakti. This hints at why his mūdra-signature is Guruguba, for there is the subversion of roles within himself as tantrika; he is the guru, but he is also the manifestation. But we might also take this further, for if Dēkshitar is Śiva, then he is causing his own recognition. In a sense, then, the temple causes Dēkshitar to create the music to experience itself! The temple was always there (satkāryavāda)—its physical manifestation just “happened” as a matter of play by Śiva. The matter only formed around it to re-cognize Śiva’s freedom.

We can therefore say that Dēkshitar creates the temple sonically because as we have ascertained, the temple is not the physical matter but the spaces and relationships it creates. Dēkshitar recreates these in his composition. The kriti manifests as an impression of the temple itself, through metaphor, and we have to wonder whether the temple we see and the temple we hear are actually any different from each other.

Finally, it might also be said that the experience of the divine through music requires the participant to become instrumental; that is, to become an instrument. Dēkshitar’s “Brhadīśvaram” recreates an experience of the particular divine through metaphor, though the metaphor is the particular construction of his virtuosity as a tantrika and as a performer.

Conclusion: “The whole creation is a sport for Him.”

As we reconsider the dimensionality conveyed and present in this one particular kriti, it is important that we remember why and how this kriti exists. It is not simply a musical creation, though it is the metaphoric qualities of music that create signification. It is not simply a prayer by a devotee to the divine, though it is the establishment of relationship with the Divine that provides its theological implications. It is not simply an esoteric instruction by a Tantrika for achieving transcendence, though such depth could not have been achieved unless the composer had been a Tantrika. It is not simply a composition about a temple, though the temple becomes the metaphor to realize that our experience is a pulsation between the inner and outer temple that exists in the micro- and macrocosms. Finally, it is not simply a song about the Great Lord; it is the very way in which the Great Lord experiences freedom.

The “Brhadīśvaram” kriti exists for no other reason that as “sport for Him.” The models we utilize to appreciate this process, whether architecture, literature, or theology, are the reverberations from the pulsation of Śiva and Sakti and, as such, are no less manifestations of the divine.

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