

Donald Judd In Marfa A Critical Look at His Architectural Work Ten Years After His Passing

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Donald Judd was at the forefront of a group of internationally renowned artists in the 1960s who were researching and exploring a series of artistic and thematic concerns later to be defined by art historians as minimalism. In the early 1970's, Judd left New York City for Marfa, Texas where he first rented and later bought several properties. In 1978 and 1979 the DIA Art Foundation acquired the defunct Fort D. A. Russell, a U.S. Army outpost located at the southern end of the town of Marfa, at which Judd had been stationed in 1947. The fort subsequently became the Chinati Foundation in 1987. Here in Marfa, living and working until his death in 1994, Judd made his major contribution to architecture. Judd succeeded in preserving and reactivating these military buildings as well as other buildings in the town of Marfa and the surrounding area, transforming them for his private use and for permanent installations of his and his colleagues' artwork.

Located in the Chihuahua desert at the southern end of the Davis Mountains, Marfa is situated within West Texas in the historic military context of Fort Davis, approximately 60 miles from the Mexican border. Marfa, as the legend goes, was named in 1883 by the wife of a railroad executive for a character in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, when the town was designated as a water stop on the Galveston, Harrisburg and San Antonio Railroad. Marfa had a population of 5,000 during its boom period. Today there are about 2,500 people living in this former cattle town; a town now struggling with a declining economy but transformed by the living art and architecture of Donald Judd.

When Judd arrived in Marfa many of the buildings he acquired were in need of restoration. Judd described the status of Fort D. A. Russell:

Most of Fort Russell was a ruin. Other than two artillery sheds and later the Arena. I was against buying it. It had

been an army base, which is not so good. Most buildings were without roofs, there was trash everywhere and the land was damaged. Some of the barracks had been turned into kitsch apartments with compatible landscaping. Military landscape overlain with a landscape of consumer kitsch is hard to defeat. At any rate the artillery sheds were concrete and solid, although they leaked.¹

Judd describes here a damaged landscape, a landscape littered with increasingly unsympathetic, incompatible, successive occupations. Discouraged, dubious of his decision to purchase the site, Judd was nevertheless undaunted in his vision of a landscape that could be rewoven, restored by his art and architecture.

Visitors arriving at Marfa and the Chinati Foundation today discover a town and surrounding landscape that is simultaneously preserved, renewed, and transformed by the vision and work of Donald Judd—a landscape that continues to be a dynamic inspiration not only to artists and architects but to anyone who can perceive the genius of place. This paper focuses on how Judd achieved this genius of place through his architecture, which is first and foremost an architecture of light and space.

DONALD JUDD, ARCHITECT?

Was Donald Judd an architect? The question is not easily answered. Judd was not a *registered* architect, nor did he have a degree in architecture. In the United States the title "architect" is reserved for those who earn it through academic schooling and practice proven by an exam. The question of whether or not Judd wanted to become an architect was perhaps best answered by Judd himself in his 1987 essay, *Art and Architecture*:

While I was in the army in '47, helping to occupy Korea, before going to college, my assignment to myself was to decide between being an architect or an artist, which to me was being a *painter* [emphasis mine]. Art was the most likely in the balance, but the decisive weight was that in architecture it was necessary to deal with the clients and the public. This seemed impossible to me, as did the business of a firm.²

Judd considered taking the route to become a professional architect, but his choice to become a painter had less to do with any fundamental difference that he perceived between art and architecture than it did with the notion of creative autonomy. Judd brought a new understanding and quality of experience to the art of sculpting, and he brought that same understanding and experience to his architecture, namely the opening of interior space within a sculpture so that it can be perceived fully from the exterior. Although some art historians categorize Judd as a sculptor, Judd himself rejected the category, calling his three-dimensional work “pieces”. Architecture is space, its boundaries defined by the architect, and Judd thought of sculpture as an architect – in terms of boundaries set by space and light. Judd explored his notions of space not in the traditional sense of “sculpture” but in “pieces” or “works.” His use of these terms is significant, for it reveals how much Judd was thinking as the architect that he most certainly was.

In “Specific Objects,” one of his defining essays about his view of space published in 1965, Judd wrote: “The thing as a whole, its quality as a whole, is what is interesting.”³ By “whole” Judd meant the artwork and its immediate surroundings echoing, if not directly referring to a concept of space rooted in the Renaissance. Lars Lerup, Dean of the School of Architecture at Rice University in Houston, recognized Judd’s affinity to the Renaissance. In his book *After the City*, Lerup speaks of both Judd and Leon Battista Alberti, saying first that, “Aside from being hauntingly beautiful, Judd’s Marfa holds many lessons.”⁴ One of the lessons, in Lerup’s mind, was Alberti’s holistic description of the city. Quoting and expanding on Alberti’s dictum Lerup states:

The house is a small town, and the town is a large house, the art is a small town and so is the furniture. The dictum may again ring true despite its original simplifications, because the additional and parallel reflections make other more complex computations possible.⁵

Judd made those “complex computations” in his work at Marfa. The complex unity of Judd’s holistic approach to design is, in part, the result of his work process. Around the time of his 1965 essay “Specific Objects,” Judd began commissioning the production of his pieces to manufacturing companies like Bernstein Bros. in New York. Over the years Judd collaborated with various national and international manufacturing companies. Considering the development of Judd’s work, from early to

late pieces, one can see how precise and refined the pieces became. His work process, then, was similar to the working methods of architects. Architects, designers, and industrial designers search for the best contractor, builder, craftsmen or manufacturing company to produce their designs. The designer builds a relationship with a manufacturer for years and improves, over time, the craftsmanship of the work.

The success of Judd’s work process was widely recognized in 1976 when he was invited to exhibit at the Kunsthalle in Bern, Switzerland. Judd traveled to Switzerland to examine the exhibition space and then made his proposal. A small black and white exhibition catalogue was produced, with an introduction by the Kunsthalle director, Johannes Gachnang, who described Judd’s work in a glowing critique:

This book is a document of the 5 sculptures made by Donald Judd for his exhibition in the 5 rooms of Kunsthalle Bern. After a first visit of the place in summer of 1975 and an examination of the ground-plan he made 5 sketches for 5 individual sculptures relating to the rooms. They are Finish birch plywood 3/4 inches thick, each 48 inches high with a distance always of 60 inches from the walls. The 5 works were fabricated by two men of Mr. Heinz Geiser’s carpenter shop in Bern and are exhibited at the Kunsthalle Bern from April 14 to May 30; after the exhibition they will be removed and dismantled.

Each of these 5 sculptures can be looked at separately from the others and together they relate, widely and openly. In connection with his work Donald Judd is a *sovereign architect* [emphasis mine] of our time, able to handle volume and hollow space.⁶

Unlike other exhibition catalogues of Judd’s work, the one from Bern presents Judd’s sketches, a floor plan (Fig. 01) of the exhibition rooms, and construction photographs (Fig. 02) showing the carpenters assembling the pieces on site. By visiting the exhibition space first, Judd was not unlike the architect who goes to the site, evaluates the work site, and then responds with a design. Then, the contractor builds the building from plans of the architect. The architect oversees the work but he is removed from the actual building process. Robin Evans describes the architects’ role best in his essay, “Architectural Projections”: “Architects do not make buildings, they make drawings of buildings.”⁷

Not only can Judd’s work process be compared to that of an architect, there is of course the spatial aspect, “the thing as a whole” as Judd described it in “Specific Objects,” in which he compares the Badia di Fiesole near Florence Italy to Leon Battista Alberti’s Palazzo Rucellai, arguing that the spatial quality of the Badia surpasses the representational character of Alberti’s Palazzo Rucellai. To Judd the interior space is more interesting than the façade:

The difference between the new work and earlier painting and present sculpture is like that between one of Brunelleschi's windows in the Badia di Fiesole and the facade of the Palazzo Rucellai, which is only an undeveloped rectangle as a whole and is mainly a collection of highly ordered parts.⁸

Judd was prescient in his critique for today one of the most respected Brunelleschi scholars, Howard Saalman, strongly doubts that Brunelleschi is the architect of the Badia, the first building of the Italian Renaissance covered with masonry barrel vaults. In forthcoming studies Saalman intends to demonstrate that the Badia's design should be credited to Alberti.⁹ More interesting is that Judd, when he wrote his fundamental essay, was interested in the spatial quality of the building interior, not in the compositional aspect of the façade.

In 1968, Judd purchased a cast-iron building on 101 Spring Street, in the SoHo district of New York City and subsequently renovated it and installed his and his friends' artwork. This cast-iron building set the precedent for Judd's architectural renovation method. Judd, in his book *Architektur*, described his work on 101 Spring Street:

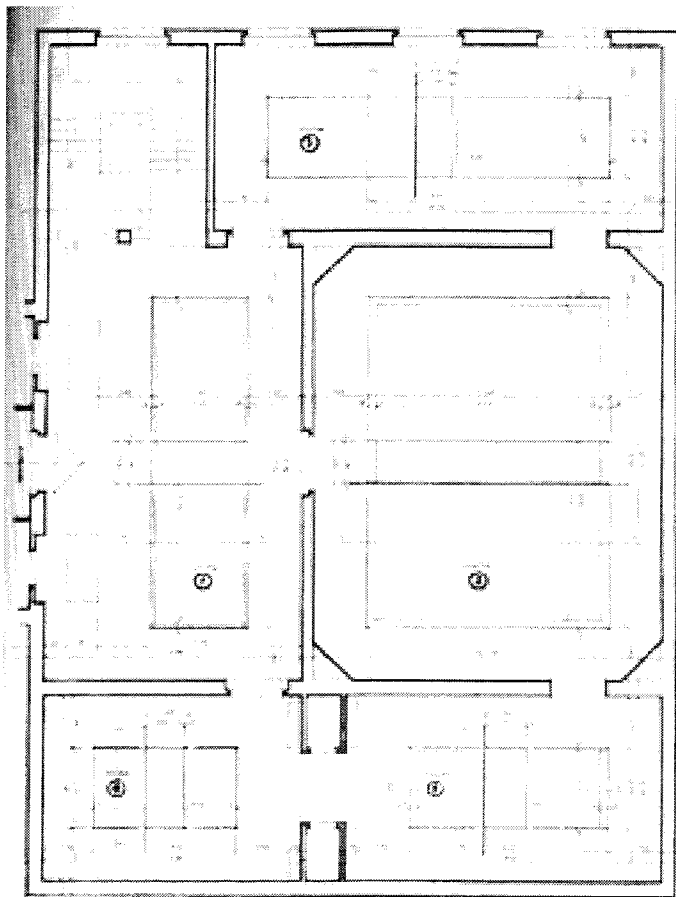


Fig. 1. Floor plan Kunsthalle, Bern¹⁰

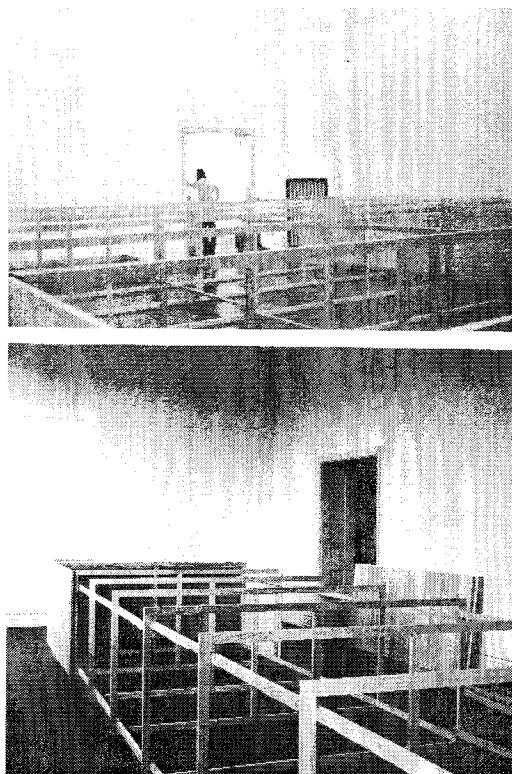


Fig. 2. Installation of pieces, Kunsthalle, Bern¹¹

These ideas were precedents for some small pieces and then for 100 mill aluminum pieces in the Chinati Foundation. The renovation of the Building and the permanent purpose of the building are precedents for the larger spaces in my place in Texas, Mansana de Chinati, for the Chinati Foundation, and will be for the Ayala de Chinati.¹²

Like the thoughtful planning of his artwork, Judd carefully considered his move to Marfa. After considering various places in California and Arizona he choose Marfa, the Texas town he first saw as a solider during his military assignment in 1947. In Marfa he began renovating buildings and installing his and his friends' artwork. Judd was in full control of those design aspects that art galleries and museums were unable to provide. As nostalgic as his move to West Texas seems in retrospect, it was a courageous decision and he must have had a vision of what he was about to create on former army base in a small cattle town, far from the bustling art scene of New York City.

Judd condemned the museum boom of the late twentieth century with its commercial approach, with the authority as one of the most respected and established artists of his generation. Judd strongly criticized and rebuked the leading late twentieth architects such as Peter Eisenman, Hans Hollein, and Frank Gehry in his frequent essays and interviews on art and architecture. In his published exhibition catalogue entry for the

Vienna exhibition of 1991, Judd condemned the designs for art museums by Hollein and Gehry saying:

The art museum becomes exquisitely pointless, a fake for fakes, a double fake, the inner sanctum of a fake society. Of course Hans Hollein is good at this. He and the Guggenheim Museum of New York plan a negative and fake Guggenheim for Salzburg, a hole in the ground. What is the public and what are students supposed to think of the horrifying design of Frank Gehry's museum of design for Vitra? These buildings make a joke of architecture, of art, of culture of the community, and of the whole society.¹³

One architect did share Judd's sculpted sense of architecture. Rudolph M. Schindler (1887-1953), Austrian born Los Angeles architect and student of Frank Lloyd Wright, called his architectural philosophy "Space Architecture" which he, as a modernist, believed would change how architects think about design. Schindler and Gehry had opposite approaches to architecture. Schindler designed his buildings from the inside out, and this method made him different from many of his contemporaries. As Schindler said:

The architect of the past saw the building as a mass of structural material which he carved. His medium of expression was the same as the sculptor's mass form. The architect of our time is discovering a new medium: space. The house of the future is a symphony of "space forms" – each room a necessary and unavoidable part of the whole. Structural materials, walls, ceilings, floors, are only the means to an end: the definition of space forms. They lose their individual importance and are simplified to the utmost – a simple weave of a few materials articulates space into the rooms.¹⁴

Judd owned several pieces of Schindler furniture and appreciated Schindler's ideas and interest in space architecture. Judd modified a small house in Marfa where his own early works are placed in harmony with Schindler's furniture and he collected other Modernist pieces of furniture by Alvar Aalto, Gerrit Rietveld, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and pieces of Arts and Crafts furniture. Judd's own furniture design has been well recognized and documented and follows the traditions of the Arts and Crafts and of Modernism in that it seeks a unity in design, linking architecture, furniture, and the decorative and practical arts. This search for harmony extended to controlling space through furniture design.

Just as unity in design was a Modernist principle, so was proportion, that most basic component of all Classical design. The leaders of early twentieth century Modernism were claiming a break with the past, yet work of Mies van der Rohe,¹⁵ and Le Corbusier,¹⁶ as the latest research shows, are much more related to classical architecture than the originators

wanted us to believe. For example, Corbusier's proportioning system, the Modulor, is in the tradition with the concern of proportions in antiquity and the Renaissance. For Judd, proportions were also significant to his work:

Proportion is very important to us, both in our minds and lives and as objectified visually, since it is thought and feeling undivided, since it is unity and harmony, easy or difficult, and often peace and quiet. Proportion is specific and identifiable in art and architecture and creates our space and time. Proportion and in fact all intelligence in art is instantly understood, at least by some. It's a myth that difficult art is difficult.¹⁷

Judd respected the work of the leading Modernist architects. On the first, superficial glance Judd's work can be regarded in that Modernist tradition. If we take the comparison of the Modernist and Judd, however, we quickly see that Modernists were not concerned with the renovation of existing structures. One of the ideas of Modernism was a profound break with the past and the Modernist architect did not want to compromise a design with historic structures that would compete with the Modern additions. Especially in North America where the building substance does not have as long of a history as in Europe, there was most of the time only one solution – tear down and make room for new. A prominent well-recognized exception to this is the addition to Yale's University Art Gallery (1951-1953) in New Haven, Connecticut by Louis I. Kahn. (Fig. 03) A quick look at the façade's exterior clearly reveals Kahn's intention of contrasting the neo-Gothic context of the university. During the same time in Europe, the still relatively unknown German architect Hans Dollgast (1891-1974) reconstructed and expanded the Bavarian Alte Pinakothek, (constructed 1826-1836, reconstruction 1952-1957) in Munich, (Fig. 04) which was damaged during World War II. His method of restoring was using different materials and finishes but retaining the same proportions of the arches by the original architect Leo von Klenze (1784-1864). Carol Scarpa (1906-1978) developed his method of renovation and additions to historic buildings with the renovation of the Museo di Castelvecchio (1958-1964) in Verona.

These examples, while very different, share one common idea – old and new are clearly marked. Each of them added to an existing building making it clear to the visitor where the historical building stops and where the new begins. Especially Scarpa's concern to reveal old and new thorough gaps and joints and changes in materials became very influential of how architects began to emphasize what is existing and what is new.

Judd, however, was not concerned with the idea of distinguishing the difference of the existing and of what he added, or in most of the cases, took away from the existing building. Judd was concerned about the *whole*, which means the building and its context. He was not interested in a dialogue between old and

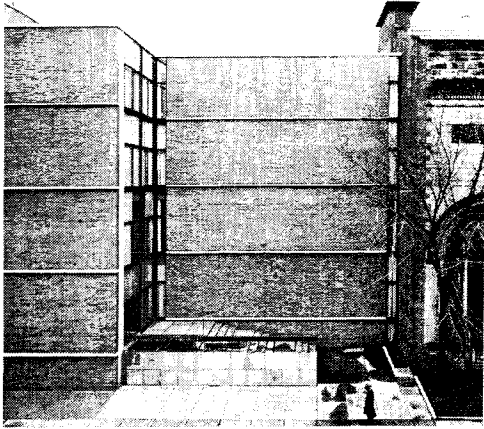


Fig. 3. Entrance Yale Art Gallery Addition, New Haven, CT¹⁹

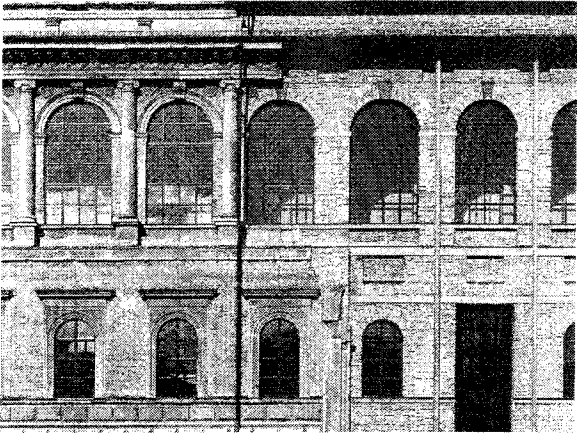


Fig. 4. Elevation Alte Pinakothek, Munich²⁰

new. His dialogue was more concerned with the building, the art, and the urban or landscape context. This should be an architect's main concern because the exhibition space, its architecture, should be good for whatever artwork is exhibited. A museum designed for the sake of architecture ignores the artwork, which should be the main reason for the buildings existence. The examples of Kahn, Dollgast, and Scarpa are respected and are common examples widely presented and taught at architecture schools in Europe and America. Judd understood this and perhaps it is the main reason he rejected so vigorously the museums and the designers of the late twentieth century. In his thinking, many leading architects were more concerned about promoting their own expression and reputation than with creating a good space for the art.

The buildings in Marfa, before Judd acquired them, were mostly military, industrial or commercial structures. The simple geometry of those buildings was agreeable to Judd's design philosophy—philosophy that might have originated during Judd's service as a military engineer in 1946 and 1947.¹⁸ Thomas Kellein author of *The Whole Space. The Early work of Donald Judd* proposes such a connection in his book, *Donald Judd. Early Work 1955-1968*.

Viewing the extent and nature of the building activities at Marfa in light of Judd's biography, one cannot help registering that even before he decided to work as an artist, he had already been involved in engineering projects where he created enclosed areas and walk-in spaces. According to an Army of the United States Separation Qualification Record, during his military service Judd, together with three other U.S. army personnel and fifty Koreans, erected "frames and pre-fabricated buildings"—just as he was to do again at his Mansana de Chinati thirty years later.²³

Judd was interested in giving his buildings a unity and grandness experienced through space. He achieved this by closing openings, making new ones and adding skylights. The effect, seen at the Arena (Fig. 05 and 06), the Artillery Shed, and the Chamberlain Building is powerful and dramatic. It is not obvious to the viewer what exactly was added or subtracted. Judd did not see the need to express the difference between old and new, rather he wanted the visitor to experience the whole. Just as he intended his pieces to be experienced as exterior expressions of the interior, Judd operated with similar principle in his architecture. One can perceive simultaneously exterior

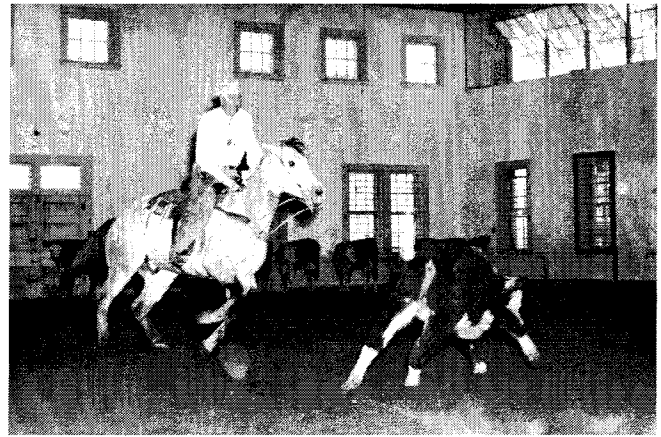


Fig. 5. Arena in about 1958²¹

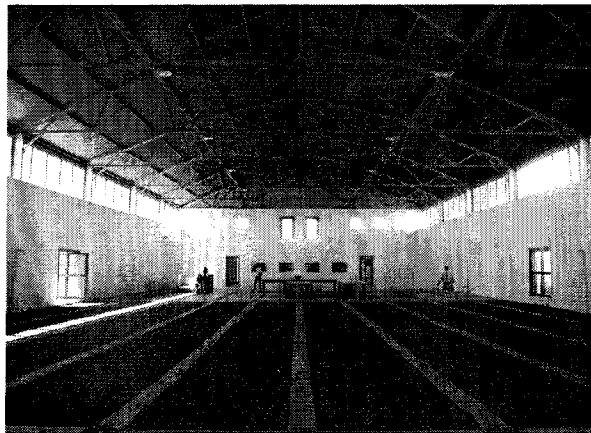


Fig. 6. Arena, 2002²²

and interior spatial relations in the Artillery Sheds, the Arena, or the Chamberlain building.

Architecture must be experienced in person to be understood, perceived, and appreciated. You cannot see space: you can only see its boundaries, its limits. Similarly, music affects us most intensely as three dimensional experience – the sight, sound, and the very presence of the performer(s) and audience create an integrated experience for the senses. The complex unity of Judd’s spaces can be compared to a musical performance. Similar to music, space surrounds the entire body. It is important in architectural education that students are constantly reminded of this aspect of the three-dimensional experience. A palpable sensitivity to space is essential to anyone who designs for a living. The three-dimensional experience cannot be reduced to two-dimensional photography or film, and for this reason, it is imperative that students of design develop an understanding of how Donald Judd created architectural space by visiting his work in Marfa. Then, perhaps, students of architecture would agree with the proposition of the Italian architect and critic Bruno Zevi:

... even if the other arts contribute to architecture, it is *interior space*, the space which surrounds and includes us, which is the basis for our judgment of a building, which determines the “yea” or “nay” of esthetic pronouncement of architecture. All the rest is important or perhaps we should say *can* be important, but always in a subordinate relation to the spatial idea. Whenever critics and historians lose sight of this hierarchy, they create confusion and accentuate the present disorientation in architecture.

That space-void-should be the protagonist of architecture is after all natural. Architecture is not art alone, it is not merely a reflection of conceptions of life or a portrait of a system of living. Architecture is environment, the stage on which our lives unfold.²⁴

This “environment,” this “stage” is what Judd achieved in Marfa. Like the work of a Renaissance master, most interested in the holistic, spatial experience of architecture Judd’s altered buildings in Marfa speak for themselves as architecture. Yes, Donald Judd was an architect.

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