

Ghosts of Canberra's Past: Griffin's East Lake, Lake Park and Lake Shore

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Freelance consultant and writer Mark Butz researches social and environmental history, with a focus on the Canberra area. The following article relates to his research into the Molonglo floodplain. It recalls some elements of the Griffin plan that have been largely forgotten, and points to the story behind the name of an ambitious urban renewal project.

The urban renewal project is termed East Lake – a 471 ha area lying between Kingston Foreshore, Jerrabomberra Wetlands and Fyshwick, and including the railway station. This article examines the original East Lake idea and two integrally related elements of the Griffin plan, revisiting their place in its vision and their subsequent treatment.

At the heart of the story are: a vast body of water that never eventuated, of which only faint echoes remain; a grand landscaped park of which a tiny and declining remnant remains; and a prestige residential area that became an industrial sprawl. All were defended staunchly by Griffin in the face of professional conflicts and petty jealousies – battles that he ultimately lost, and those ideas can never again be realised. We can, however, work to ensure that they are not completely forgotten. This is timely as we approach the centenary of the Griffins' departure from Canberra.

The Promise in Griffin's Vision

The Griffin plan was never confined to the notional square of the Canberra city area; instead it embodied connections, relationships and possibilities in the broader landscape setting. A prime example is in the 'ornamental waters' to be created as an asset for the city. Within the city area, the Griffin plan always included an extensive lakes scheme, later modified into the three central basins and West Lake of today. It also included an enormous 'naturalistic' East Lake, which would sit six metres higher than the central basins and would approximate the level of the then highest recorded flood (of 1891). In today's geography it would cover all of Dairy Flat and low-lying parts of Fyshwick and Pialligo, up to the edge of the airport runway.¹

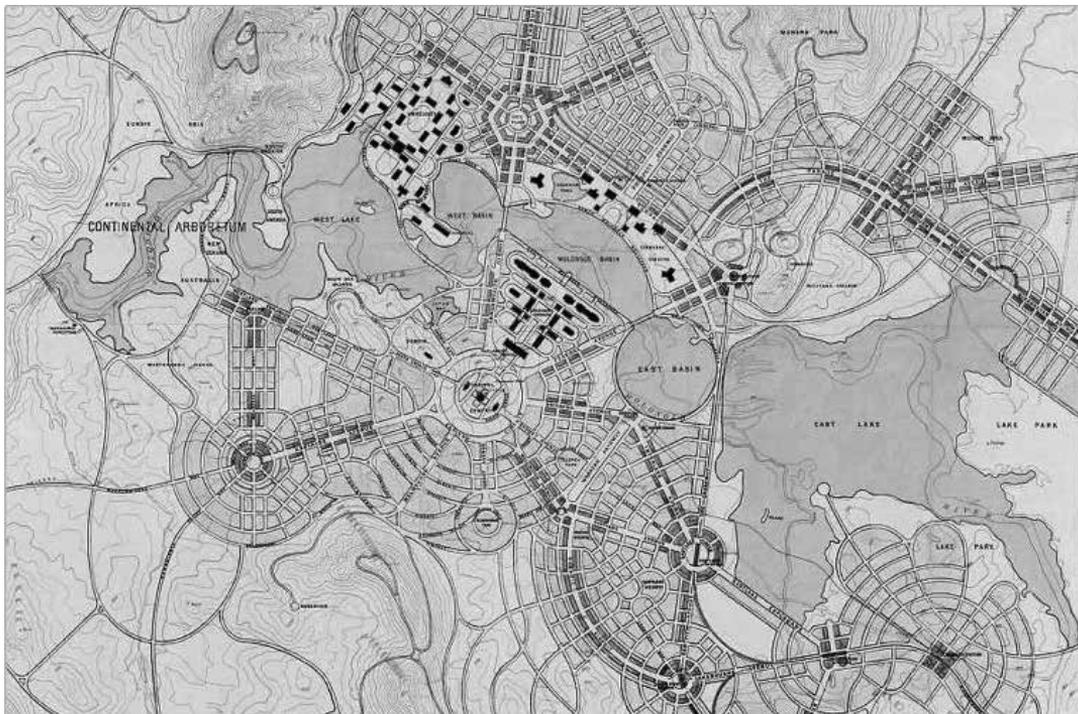
The lakes scheme in its entirety was as much a city landscape feature as the hills and ridges, with the horizontal complementing the vertical. The Griffin plan named suburbs to reflect this importance, with the suburb of Eastlake adjoining East Lake opposite Mount Pleasant, and mirroring reference to Westlake for the area adjoining West Lake opposite Black Mountain. Additional geographic orientation included the names Northbourne, Southbourne, Westbourne and Eastbourne (drawn from an ancient term for a stream or brook).

The extensive waters of East Lake were to be retained by a mile long 'boulevard embankment' or 'weir bridge' across the Molonglo floodplain, on the Causeway axis of the plan. It was to carry pedestrians, roadways, and railway lines, with sweeping views. Beyond aesthetic visions, Griffin saw the embankment as a necessity, concerned that without such a dam the central ornamental lakes 'would silt up and become suitable only for rich people with yachts'.²

All of the water features were to be fringed with landscaped parks. Specifically, East Lake would be bordered by a spacious Lake Park, with higher ground to the south offering spectacular views over lakes and city from 'horticultural suburbs' of the 'Lake Shore Subdivision'.³

The Griffin plan is characterised by balances and contrasts. At the high western end of the Water Axis were Black Mountain, the Forest Reserve and Botanic Garden and West Lake. East Lake and Lake Park were at the lower eastern end. Here the plan was for a dense forest backdrop on the shores of the lake: a pinetum in the south and a redwood forest in the north.⁴

Residents and visitors could be left in no doubt about the primacy of East Lake as the dominant feature of this part of the city. By rail, from Queanbeyan the line would pass through the stations of Riverbourne, Lake Park, Lakebourne, Lake View, and



across the Causeway to the city, and beyond to join the Sydney-Melbourne line at Yass. By road, motorists would encounter Eastlake Circle, Eastlake Esplanade, Eastlake Avenue, Eastview Avenue, Lake View Circle, Interlake Avenue, Lakebourne Avenue, and South Lake Avenue.⁵

The Reality – Mired In Conflict, Local and Global

Preliminary Skirmish: Powerhouse and Railway

Griffin found himself in conflict with departmental officials from his first visit in August 1913, when he found new constructions that contradicted his plan (notably the power house and the first railway alignment), demonstrating a prevalent local view that he was not to be the person in charge.

Initial Battle: East Lake and City Railway

The Great War broke out two months after the Griffins arrived in May 1914. At

ABOVE: Detail of Canberra: plan of city and environs 1918, showing East Lake at right, bounded on the west by the Causeway embankment, and flanked by Lake Park.

Source: National Library of Australia MAP G8984.C3G45 1918

this fledgling stage of the city, funds were withdrawn from its development, few capital works were undertaken, and the population shrank. Griffin meanwhile was fighting his own battles in Canberra, with many of his ideas hotly contested. The Director-General of Works (Col. P.T. Owen) openly expressed the view that Griffin's plans 'involve drifting into huge schemes, and we do not know where they will lead us'. These 'huge schemes' included East Lake and the City Railway, the latter cited as 'the chief source of contention between the Departmental Board and Mr. Griffin.'⁶

The decision was taken in 1916 to delay development of ornamental lakes on the Molonglo for some years, and to postpone East Lake indefinitely, citing grounds of expense, large land area to be lost, the area and mass of water contained in the other (smaller) proposed lakes, and the earthen embankment on the Causeway, which was not seen as 'a harmonious feature in the

landscape'.⁷

Griffin persevered with the idea of the Causeway and Civic Railway, and gained approval for a temporary facility, with a light construction tramway to the west of the proposed permanent alignment. A timber trestle bridge was built across the Molonglo, with a low earthen embankment across the floodplain, with the line opened for goods traffic in 1921. Griffin also proceeded with forward planting of Lake Park. He was determined to establish redwoods here, despite horticultural advice that they were unlikely to survive in Canberra's climate.⁸

Major Battle (and an Intervention): The Arsenal

The war years cast their shadow on planning and development of the city. A mix of patriotic fervour and a desire to show the relevance of having a Federal Territory and Federal Capital strengthened the hand of those who sought to diminish or subvert Griffin's ideas.

In 1915 Col. Owen proposed an armament factory in the Territory, aiming to make the nation less dependent on imports of armaments and to consolidate manufacturing of weapons and ammunition. A Canberra location would be readily defended (far enough from the sea) and close to a main railway line, with room to expand, and with space for a 'garden suburb' to house the workforce. It would also assert the interests of the Commonwealth over those of the states, including regulation of labour.⁹

Colonel Owen suggested two possible sites: one 3-4 miles from Queanbeyan, adjoining the Molonglo and the Canberra railway line; and the other on Woolshed Creek opposite RMC Duntroon. In September 1915 work commenced on site no.1 while a commission headed by Col. Owen inspected arsenal development in India. Griffin became aware of the plan only after he was consulted about the laying out of 150-200 cottages. He was strongly opposed to the Molonglo site ('no.1'), which would subvert plans for Lake Park and Lake Shore. He offered an

alternative site ('no.2') in an area designated for industrial development, near the future Canberra-Yass railway, perhaps in hope that the Arsenal would speed up construction of that rail link. This was in 'Ainslie' (on today's map: Lyneham-O'Connor, near St Ninian's church). Meanwhile, the commission chose to ignore Griffin, confident that they had 'fully proved the demerits of such a position'.¹⁰

In November 1915 local newspapers noted progress of construction and declared the site 'a most beautiful one', with magnificent views, which would afford 'some of the best gardens in the district.' The paper commended departmental officers 'for selecting what is an ideal site', seemingly unaware of Griffin's identical high hopes for Lake Shore.¹¹

Griffin dug in for a fight, declaring that site no.1 would 'destroy the design of the city' by industrialising part of Lake Park. By adopting site no. 1 'his plan for a park and ornamental lake was killed', because a mile and a half of lake foreshore would be lost to public access, marring the beauty and amenity of the area, with the lake becoming the foreground for a factory building. He saw 'an abrogation of the entire lake scheme', and if developed with workmen's dwellings it would completely turn the city plan 'bottom side up'. He also believed that it would lead to development of a 'mini-town' at the border, with land speculation that would benefit Queanbeyan while compromising the retail and residential development of Canberra.¹²

This was a fight he could not have won until, in November 1915, a change in government brought King O'Malley to be Minister for Home Affairs. He restored Griffin's authority as Director of Design and Construction, and directly intervened against the department in siting the Arsenal, requiring it 'to accord with the design for the Federal Capital'.¹³

Because of unreliable water supply at both sites 1 and 2, a new site (no.3) was suggested in March 1916, on the Murrumbidgee River at Tuggeranong near Pine Island. By this stage, Griffin's opponents had been reduced to arguing that he was

not suitable to be involved in any way with construction of the Arsenal because he was an American rather than a British subject. Cabinet did not ratify the Tuggeranong site until February 1918, and this 'great national undertaking' came to wither on the vine, overtaken by world events. In November it was postponed, 'pending advice from overseas'. That advice was to abandon a new Arsenal in favour of expanding existing factories.¹⁴

The frustrating history and wasted expenditure of the Arsenal proposal added fuel to forces working against continued investment in the Federal Capital. In the same process Griffin's relationships with the department were irretrievably damaged. Although O'Malley left office in November 1916, Griffin appears to have held stronger sway in Canberra's design and construction, until his position was abolished in 1920. While he may have believed that he had successfully insulated the area for Lake Shore from contradictory ideas, several new proposals emerged. But unlike the Arsenal, these were temporary in nature, keeping alive his vision.

The Concentration Camp

After China declared war on Germany in August 1917, the British Government requested that Australia establish an internment camp to house about 3500 German and Austrian nationals being expelled from China. The site chosen overlapped markedly with the Arsenal no.1 site. The total area was about 1 200 acres, with most works focused on a central area of about 250 acres.¹⁵

Although the camp was completed by the end of April 1918, diplomatic intervention meant that the intended detainees did not arrive, and it lay vacant until German and Austrian nationals in family groups were transferred from internment camps at Bourke and Berrima. Most had been planters, merchants, mariners and missionaries, rounded up in British colonies such as Fiji, Nauru, New Guinea, Singapore, Ceylon and

Hong Kong. They numbered less than 10 per cent of the intended occupancy.¹⁶

The war came to a long-awaited close just six months after the Molonglo Camp was commissioned. After another six months, from May 1919, the internees were progressively deported to Germany (even though they had not come from there). The camp was closed at the end of 1919, leaving behind 160 buildings – tenement blocks, latrine and ablution blocks, administration buildings, stores and military barracks, all overlooked by a guard tower.¹⁷

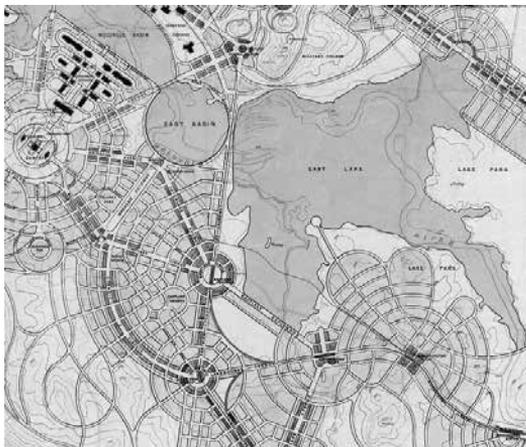
Soldier Settlement

Late in 1919 the Molonglo Camp site was first recommended for use for soldier settlement blocks. The Surveyor-General delayed any such action, 'pending a decision as to the immediate intention of the Government regarding the Federal Capital'. This suggests limited optimism that Canberra would continue to be developed in the post-War period.¹⁸

In April 1920 it was decided to establish the Mill Flats Soldier Settlement Area by subdividing the Mill Flat floodplain into more than 30 'lucerne leases' (around 25 to 35 acres each), available for 5 to 20 years. Following Griffin's request that no leases be issued on 'highlands immediately adjacent to Mill Flat', the lease map labels the Molonglo Camp site on higher ground as 'proposed plantation', to be planted as part of the Lake Park Pinetum and horticultural treatments for Lake Shore. Griffin was not concerned about the blocks on the river flats, as they would eventually be inundated by East Lake. The Surveyor-General noted that residential option for lessees could be provided in the future, should 'the decision to plant the whole of the Molonglo Camp hill be reviewed, which is recommended'. Once again, Griffin's ideas were at odds with the Department.¹⁹

Molonglo Settlement

Meanwhile, still in 1920, the camp in its reduced form became the Molonglo



ABOVE: Detail of Canberra: plan of city and environs 1918, showing East Lake at right, bounded on the west by the Causeway embankment, and flanked by Lake Park.

Source: National Library of Australia MAP G8984.C3G45 1918

Settlement for construction workers with families. The subsequent population growth here is reflected in the conversion (from 1922) of the former camp hospital and dispensary to be Molonglo Public School. By May 1925 this settlement would house 760 people, at that time the largest concentration in the Territory, comprising about 20% of the total population.²⁰

Canberra Loses the Griffins, and So Much More

Worn down by conflict and frustration, the Griffins put the worries of Canberra behind them in January 1921. The timing of this departure was unfortunate because, despite its many detractors, development of the Federal Capital was slowly gaining momentum in the 1920s, fuelled by the imminent transfer of Parliament from Melbourne. Originally planned for 1926, it was delayed, and then revitalised by firm plans for a Royal Visit to open Parliament in May 1927. At least a 'nucleus' of the public service would have to be transferred by June of that year.²¹

Just 17 months after the Griffins' departure, a record flood severely damaged the tramway trestle bridge and embankment, and an even bigger flood in 1925 completed its destruction. Even before the second

flood, a May 1924 report of the Public Works Committee had referred to the impracticability and indefinite postponement of East Lake, and predicted that it would never be constructed.²²

Although some wanted to step away quickly from Griffin's influence, in November 1925 the Government gazetted the Griffin plan as the statutory plan for the city, with Parliament as its custodian. This was effectively a map of roads and lakes, and over ensuing years decision makers managed to adhere largely to the street layout while altering the locations of city functions and important buildings, and postponing construction of other key elements.²³

The 1922 flood also ruined the Mill Flat soldier settlement scheme, due to significant losses of fodder and fencing, coupled with falling farm commodity prices between 1920 and 1924. The even larger 1925 flood inflicted significant damage on new and incomplete infrastructure, and provided more ammunition for those who cast doubt on the desirability and wisdom of persisting with the new city.²⁴

Undaunted, the Federal Capital Commission set about allocating areas for dairy farms, orchards, vegetable and poultry farms. The Commission advertised four commercial dairying leases on Mill Flat, to commence early in 1926 for a period of ten years. These blocks were between 200 and 270 acres, each containing both alluvial flats bordering the Molonglo and higher ground with a residence, outbuildings and milking yard. These did not preclude the Griffin vision for the area, since the flats would be inundated by East Lake, and the farm buildings were at the fringe of higher ground that was earmarked as Lake Park and Lake Shore. The dairy block map showed with a dotted line the 1925 flood level, whereas the 1920 map for lucerne lands had shown with a dotted line the edge of the 'proposed lake'. While the two inundation lines did not differ greatly, it suggests that in 'post-Griffin' Canberra, the prospect of the flats being inundated by East Lake may have shifted.²⁵

Still on interim measures, with the push to open Federal Parliament in 1927, the resulting influx of workers needed to be accommodated in temporary camps. In 1925-26 the Federal Capital Commission built three semi-permanent camps, including The Causeway Settlement, named for the adjacent Griffin plan axis. It began with a tent camp in 1925 followed by timber cubicles (hutments) in 1927, and in turn by some 121 timber cottages in a grid. The lower half of the settlement was in the area to be inundated by East Lake, and the 1925 flood previewed this when the lowest cottages were flooded up to the eaves.²⁶

In April 1928 two additional dairies were mooted, one on part of the old Molonglo Camp site (no.5), and another on the north side of the river, adjoining Griffin's redwood plantation (no.6) – within the areas proposed for Lake Park or Lake Shore. The no.5 dairy block wrapped around the Molonglo Public School and nearby horse paddock and took in the alluvial flats around 'Willowbank'. The successful applicant was George R. Gouge, at that time resident at Molonglo Settlement, and he established the 'Molonglo Dairy' in 1929.²⁷

Gouge struggled to break into the local market, exacerbated by the onset of the Great Depression and, in turn, severe economy measures and renewed notions about abandoning the federal capital idea. This marred the ambitions of all dairy lessees, who also struggled with significant flooding in 1931 and 1934. Gouge transferred the dairy in 1935 to Leon Russell Smith of 'Melrose' Weetangera and later to Hugh Read of 'Callum Brae', and by this time it was called 'Greenbank Dairy'. Gouge did return to Molonglo in 1936 and stayed there for some decades.²⁸

The outbreak of World War II brought further changes to the area. In 1942 the Molonglo Public School closed and became a Navy wireless telegraph station (1943-46). It was connected to nearby HMAS Harman, and was operated chiefly by the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS). The building was wrapped within Dairy no.5,

the aerials erected in paddocks with crops growing beneath them.²⁹

Wartime also brought with it shortages of fodder and labour, which further reduced the prospects of the dairymen. This prompted new approaches to production, with Gouge's dairy block growing potatoes, maize, lucerne, millet, sorghum, oats and turnips, with two orchard blocks of 170 trees of apple and other fruits.³⁰

The Molonglo Camp area had been considered for subdivision into home garden sites from 1936, but this relied on demolition of the old settlement. Delays ran into 1945, by which time it was thought that preference might be given to returned soldiers. A new plan drafted 40 lots from 6 to 11 acres, to be withdrawn from existing dairy farms (now due to expire at the end of 1950), plus the horse paddock. Again delays arose, this time from a need to finalise the Canberra-Queanbeyan railway line and adjacent development. A revised plan for fodder or cereal production was still being considered in 1953, by which time planning of the city was in a new phase, and radically different ideas emerged for the Molonglo area.³¹

In February 1950 Federal Cabinet agreed to overturn the city plan, formalising removal of a railway across the Molonglo and of East Lake. The reasons for the latter included concern about adequacy of water flows and flood protection measures, 'undue hazards' (undefined), and the need to avoid loss of productive farmland.³²

At a finer level, the numerous lake references in street naming were bound to be changed. Eastlake the suburb had already become Kingston in 1927. Now came conversion of: Eastlake Circle to Hume Circle; Interlake Avenue to Wentworth Avenue; Eastlake Avenue and Eastlake Esplanade to Canberra Avenue; and Eastview Avenue to Sturt Avenue. Lakebourne Avenue, Lake View Circle and South Lake Avenue disappeared altogether.

The demise of East Lake offered a reprieve for dairy lessees and the Causeway settlement, although both were subjected

to frequent flooding from the late 1950s to mid-1970s. Gouge's block became a target for other uses, including mining of sandstone for construction, although this proved unsuitable after exploration.³³

In 1952 the area for Lake Shore Subdivision was formally deleted from the city plan and earmarked for industrial uses. One driver for this was strong Senate Select Committee criticism of the unsightly industrial nature of Kingston and the future lake foreshore. The blighted view from Mount Pleasant, would 'surely make Burley Griffin [sic] turn in his grave'. The Committee recommended removal of such development, along with the railway station, further to the east to the 'Molonglo industrial area.' This became the Fyshwick industrial area of 110 acres. Initial blocks were advertised in 1954 and 1955, with preference given to applicants willing to surrender their industrial leases in the Kingston-Causeway area in 'sites due for clearance'. The Molonglo Settlement had to make way, and was gradually wound down and closed. Some buildings were relocated and the remainder demolished as late as the 1980s.³⁴

When East Lake was dropped from the city plan the authorities expressed confidence that without the lake they could manage the Molonglo above East Basin 'to control floods, produce effects satisfactory from an engineering point of view, and a result in harmony with the high standards demanded in a garden city'. To this end, the establishment of Lake Burley Griffin in the 1960s spawned a new generation of studies of the floodplain above the lake. These included plans for a new channel for the Molonglo, extensive landfill and reclamation, parklands, industrial development, railway yard expansion, and major roads.³⁵

Apart from the creation of the Fyshwick Sewage Treatment Plant in 1967, the malignant Causeway rubbish tip (1964-1978), and other landfill into the 1980s, few of the schemes and dreams from this era were ever started, which allowed time for changing social values and ecological perspectives to view the area with different eyes. In time the

Jerrabomberra Wetlands grew in popularity and in 1991 a nature reserve was established, taking in much of the old Mill Flat (by now Dairy Flat).³⁶

In 2004 The Griffin Legacy project under the National Capital Authority offered a renewed vision for Canberra as the national capital into the 21st century. It explicitly examined which elements of the Griffin plan had been implemented, which needed protection, which had been lost or altered, which were no longer relevant, and which could beneficially be recovered or adapted. Elements not yet realised included East Lake and Lake Park, although these were considered 'no longer relevant' due to ecological values of the wetlands, engineering constraints, and existing development. It did, however, foresee opportunities to enhance the Water Axis and Causeway Axis, to reclaim and interpret some of the geometry.³⁷

In the same year the Canberra Spatial Plan identified, as East Lake (but on the land), an area for possible future urban intensification. Early plans were drafted in 2007, with consultation up to 2010 and more studies subsequently. By 2012 the stated aim was to have the area support up to 9000 people living, and 3000 people working. These plans continue to evolve.³⁸

What Is Gone and What Remains

At the eastern end of the modern lake there is certainly a calming effect in the Jerrabomberra Wetlands and the lush spread of the adjacent turf farm. And a new level of conviviality has come to the public realm in the nearby Kingston Foreshore and Dairy Road developments. Otherwise there is little that appeals in what replaced the Griffin vision for this end of the Water Axis. There is no grand lake with pines and redwoods on the shoreline. The only tangible remnant in the north is a few hundred trees in the Redwood Grove Park, adjoined by the airport and building materials recycling.³⁹ In place of a pinetum overlooked by a prestige 'horticultural suburb', the southern vista is one of industrial development interspersed with

virtual wasteland. Here there is no residential component, and no public connection to the Molonglo, seemingly destined for perpetual sand mining. Also gone is any prospect of a rail line through the city to Yass.

At a more symbolic level, lake references in official suburb and street names do persist in the one-word Eastlake, now largely confined to sporting clubs and venues, and a short Parade in the Kingston Foreshore. But the two-word East Lake has returned as an echo in one of Canberra's most ambitious and transformative urban renewal projects.

There is now no point lamenting the lost potential of the city reaching as far eastwards as the Griffin plan envisaged and there is to be no salvaging of the aesthetic and recreational amenity it proposed. Hopefully, as this part of the city is developed we will have greater recognition of that earlier vision, and more 'ghostly' echoes of it.

Acknowledgements

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