Multi-belief/Multi-faith Spaces: Theoretical Proposals for a Neutral and Operational Design

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Multi-belief/Multi-faith Spaces: Theoretical Proposals for a Neutral and Operational Design

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Francisco Díez de Velasco

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Abstract

The implementation of multi-belief/multi-faith spaces (MBS/MFS) is becoming an increasing practice in a globalised world, as it addresses the need to offer spaces for worship and religious ritual in public institutions and places, such as airports and train stations, cemeteries, hospitals, prisons, military quarters, homes for the elderly, educational and recreational centres, and even in shopping malls and work centres. This is raising a number of questions and challenges from the theoretical point of view. MBS/MFS prevent having to multiply the places for worship for every single religious option, while overcoming the thorny issue of favouring some religions over others. In cases such as illness or confinement, there is a clear demand for spaces that facilitate reflection and introspection, spaces that could be described as spiritual or seclusive, rather than religious in the strictest sense of the word. We are then faced with a situation in which the post-religious condition intermingles with the post-secular one. MBS/MFS must be acceptable as places of worship for the many religious groups that might require them, but also for users who lack any strong religious identity, and who might wish to use them as areas for quiet reflection and introspection. The design of MBS/MFS must deal with geographical orientation (a relevant issue for religions like Islam, Judaism and Orthodox Christianity), the simultaneous use of the space and conflicting timetables, physical position during worship, separation of genders, and hygiene needs, among other questions. Neutrality (and the avoidance of religiocentric premises) therefore is the main issue to be taken into consideration for the design of those kinds of spaces, even if perfect neutrality will not be possible. The paper concludes with a call for a pragmatic and contextual approach to this issue, including a detailed analysis of each centre and its specific circumstances, which can enable MBS/MFS to be an investment for the future that will satisfy the greatest number of potential users without causing conflict.

Introduction[1]

In this paper I use a double name: multi-belief/multi-faith spaces (MBS/MFS). Multi-faith spaces (MFS) is most commonly (or even exclusively) found in specialized literature (but also in real life), but from a theoretical point of view poses the problem of including the term 'faith', whose strong religious (and Christian) implication may perhaps not be acceptable to all possible users of these spaces (e.g. in non Western or non Christian contexts). The term Multi-belief spaces (MBS) seeks to be more inclusive and to satisfy both religious and non-religious users. Other names such as quiet rooms or rooms of silence do not thoroughly encompass the activities of worship that will be performed in them, some of which cannot be described as quiet or silent. The theoretically focused reflections proposed in this paper (trying to avoid religiocentric positions as a key attitude) are based on the experience and the challenge of producing an official guide for the design and implementation of MBS/MFS in Spanish public centres (Díez de Velasco 2011; also Díez de Velasco 2012a for an essay of typology of MBS/MFS in the Spanish case).

The rise of multi-belief/multi-faith spaces

The design, implementation and management of MBS/MFS are activities that continue to hold interest because of their novelty factor, yet are becoming less and less unusual in our globalised world where multi-religiosity is growing on a worldwide scale. Numerous architectural proposals are designed and built all over the world (revised by Crompton 2013). Official manuals and documents (e.g. Collins 2007 or Díez de Velasco 2011) are being published to promote the implementation of these spaces and have fostered some research projects in this area. One such project, whose numerous facets make it particularly striking, is *Multi-Faith Spaces. Symptoms and Agents of Religious and Social Change*, of the University of Manchester (2012), which led to a conference in 2012 and to a touring exhibition of the project findings (Multi-faith Spaces). A large number of such spaces are being created all over the world.[2] An interesting phenomenon is also occurring, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries: Christian chapels located in public centres (such as prisons or hospitals) are being converted into multi-faith spaces, raising a fair number of questions and associated challenges (Gilliat-Ray 2005a; Hewson and Brand 2011; Brand 2012), and leading to new demands and new policies (Engelhardt 2003; Swift 2006; 2009; Pesut 2012) that are not always dealt with to the satisfaction of all concerned (Sheik 2004; Gilliat-Ray 2005a; Abu Ras and Laird 2011).

      This phenomenon is also global, as it complies with the need to propose places of worship or quiet reflection in specific settings, such as airports or transport stations, cemeteries and chapels of rest, hospitals, prisons, military quarters, homes for the elderly,

centres of education and recreation, and even shopping malls and work centres. A broad range of users whose profiles, including their beliefs, differ considerably, make finding adequate solutions to this issue particularly complex. MBS/MFS have the advantage of providing solutions that do not require creating infinite places of worship to satisfy all religious options of use, while overcoming the thorny issue of certain religious options being favoured over others (assigning spaces to some groups but not to others).

Furthermore, a combination of opposing religious trends underlies the current promotion of this kind of space. There is a growing propensity towards non-affiliated models of religious identification for those who find these kinds of non-appointed spaces particularly agreeable. Added to this is the rising abandonment of standard religious practice and the diverse phenomena involved in redefining religious identities on an individual and collective scale that some have attempted to group beneath the umbrella term of secularization(s). Yet there is also a clear need, particularly in specific scenarios such as illness or confinement, to strengthen reflection and introspection, which requires new spaces that could be described as spiritual or seclusive rather than religious in the strictest sense of the word. Moreover, religious practice that does not spurn places that diverge from customary centres of worship still persists and those involved in it may even contemplate the new possibilities offered by these multi-religious spaces. The outcome is a combination in which the post-religious intermingles with the post-secular.

Spaces housed within airports, where globalization is very much in evidence, are significant and have been especially pioneering in this area (e.g. Moodie 2005; Stausberg 2011:38-39; Díez de Velasco 2009; 2012a; 2012b:230-234). They could be considered as a forerunner of what the future might hold —perhaps a world of cities that might become increasingly similar and marked by a kind of hybrid cultural diversity, in which shared multi-belief/multi-faith centres would be the norm, but to the detriment of places of worship exclusively appointed and appropriated by specific confessions (Díez de Velasco 2009, exploring the Marc Augé's concept of *non-lieu* as a tool in the analysis of MBS/MFS).

Hospitals, on the other hand, exemplify where these constant and varied requirements first became apparent and have thus become the object of more systematic study (e.g. Swift 2009:70-76; Carey and Davoren 2008; GC 2005:66-67; OBPRE 2011). It became evident that the diversity of belief systems that confronted the common anguish of suffering, illness and death called for a different formula, based on respect for multi-religiosity rather than on a standardised singularity.

The most precarious balance relating to religious freedom from the perspective of plurality is seen in prisons, given the general context of restricted freedom that distinguishes these centres. If MBS/MFS spaces are not provided, some inmates will not be able to visit a place of worship if they choose to, their religious practice would be reduced to the private sphere and their fundamental right to religious freedom would not be fully guaranteed. Furthermore, we cannot ignore the fact that the religious factor is far from negligible in the social reintegration of some inmates (in general: Beckford and Gilliat-Ray 1998; Beckford 2001; also GC 2010:66-68).

MBS/MFS: Characteristics and challenges (with neutrality as objective)

Shared spaces

MBS/MFS -understood in the broadest sense, which also includes a possible use as a space for seclusion- are likely to be used mainly by believers but also by non-believers. This second group would be more inclined to enter such spaces if design were neutral and users could therefore feel at ease.

The diversity of possible user profiles dictates that these spaces should be designed, implemented and managed so that they are acceptable to all users, but without ignoring the minimum basic requirements demanded by each of them. Moreover, given the highly varied nature of religion on a global scale, shared spaces are a necessity. No matter how frequently spaces are appointed to specific confessions, for example to satisfy majority religion (or religions) in a certain religious context (as in Spain, where Madrid Barajas Airport is a case in point, where three rooms have been prepared: one for Catholic worship, another for Muslim worship and a third for 'others'; Díez de Velasco 2009; 2012b: 230-234) the moment will come when minority groups will be required to share a space. In any case, from an economic standpoint, this option would be extremely costly because numerous rooms would be needed, thereby ignoring the provision of neutral treatment and neutral functionality of the space (i.e., providing the service to include all persons and all groups at a similar distance from each other, avoiding religiocentric premises).

To sum up, when compared with traditional centres of worship, these spaces can only be distinguished by a strong trend towards neutrality of design and management, in order to ensure no incompatibility of use that would limit their functionality as shared spaces. At the same time, they must be acceptable as places of worship for each of the many confessions that might require their use, but also for users who lack any strong religious identity and who might wish to use them as areas for quiet reflection or rooms of silence. It is therefore necessary to pay greater attention to widespread rather than concrete needs. Designing satisfactory non-appointed, neutral spaces poses several challenges that must be considered.

The issue of orientation

Orientate comes from the Latin (*Oriens*) and identifies the part of the sky in which the sun rises. In this case, etymology defines the orientation of the main area of a place of worship in the direction of the East. Although early Christians orientated their churches towards the East, today this is a minor question for the Evangelical and Catholic churches. This is not so for Orthodox churches where the altar must face East. It is therefore a factor that must be taken into account.

In Islam, orientation is fundamental; in all mosques, the *kiblah*, the point to which Muslims turn to pray, must face the direction of Mecca. Calculations need not be absolutely precise, since shared spaces, clearly not dedicated exclusively to Islamic worship, need not be exactly aligned with Mecca (*samt* in Arabic); it is enough that they face that direction (*yiha* in Arabic).

In Judaism, orientation towards Jerusalem is favoured when determining the direction of a synagogue. However, except in locations relatively near this city both Mecca and Jerusalem lie roughly in the same direction. A discreet mark on the wall aligned with Mecca-Jerusalem would serve perfectly well, and greater distance from these cities calls for

greater accuracy. For most other religious options, orientation is not a pressing need. For Buddhism, Hinduism and other eastern or ethnic religions, specific directions are not especially necessary and are not systematically sought after for their centres of worship located all over the globe.

In general, then, if others are not bothered by the question of direction, orientating MBS/MFS towards Mecca and Jerusalem and clearly marking that direction might be criteria to follow. Orientation towards the East should also be clarified if it does not coincide with orientation towards Mecca/Jerusalem in order to satisfy the needs of Orthodox Christians in particular.

The challenge of conflicting times

One of the greatest challenges when creating shared places of worship is time; that is, the fact that two or more confessions might wish to make use of the space at the same time. Once again, Muslim demands are the most systematic. Daily prayers in Islam must be said according to specific times governed by the sun: at dawn (*salat al fajr*, which must be done between daybreak and sunrise), at noon (*salat al dhuhr*, when the sun is at its zenith), in the afternoon (*salat al asr*), in the evening (*salat al isha*) and at sunset (*salat al maghrib*, when the sun goes down). The further away from the equator, the greater the differences between winter and summer at sunrise and sunset. Prayer times will therefore change throughout the year, though to a much lesser extent for noon prayers, which are only affected by adding or subtracting one hour in March and October in countries that adhere to daylight saving time. Around the time of the summer solstice we find very early sunrises and very late sunsets (and the opposite for the winter solstice) and points of balance between day and night at the time of the equinox. Moreover, depending on whether we are in a more northern or more equinoctial location, the differences between solstices and equinoxes will be lesser or greater. Likewise, when calculating the time of prayer, it is important to consider the longitude of the location in the same time zone.

The fact is then that if Muslims use a MBS/MFS for their five prayers, in all likelihood they will be the most frequent users, since they pray every day for around fifteen minutes, although Friday noon prayers last longer. Since these times change throughout the year, drawing up a rota that will be compatible with other users in the same time frame is anything but simple. The matter becomes particularly complicated between midday and night-time, since four prayer times are concentrated into this time band. Such constant daily use in Islam has led to what has been graphically dubbed 'the elephant in the prayer room' (Hewson and Brand 2011:18). Moreover, many authors have highlighted the unsatisfactory way that the particular needs of Islam have often been handled in these spaces (e.g. Sheik 2004; Abu Ras and Lance 2011; Gilliat-Ray 2011).

To sum up, if a single common annual timetable were to be drawn up for a specific space, the changing times of Muslim prayers would mean that that space would be occupied virtually all afternoon, unless other confessions were allowed to make use of the often lengthy free slots, particularly in summer. The mornings, however, would be much freer after sunrise (when the dawn prayer must have ended) until midday when the noon prayer begins, as Muslims would not use the space. Since Christian worship usually takes place in the morning, any incompatibility of usage at that time would be greatly assuaged.

Judaism also follows a rigorous practice of three daily communal prayers, but the times are generally more flexible. Thus, morning prayer (*shajarit*) could fit in with other

confessions and could be programmed to follow the Muslim dawn prayer and, for example, on Sunday, which is expected to be the busiest day in many countries, could take place before Christian worship. Afternoon prayer (*mincha*), bearing in mind some Jewish sensibilities, could be performed alongside prayer at evening (*ma'ariv*), resulting in the MBS/MFS being used just twice (morning and evening). In any case, Jewish evening prayers would coincide to a certain extent with Muslim prayer times. Each case would therefore require careful study in order to avoid such clashes, particularly on Fridays. It is also worth considering that, for a certain number of Jews, the *minyan* (a quorum of ten males) is important for community worship, and it is unlikely that in most countries ten participants will gather at these kinds of centres, except on the Sabbath and for certain main festivities (Yom Kippur, for example). It is also true, however, that other less orthodox or less traditional Jewish sensibilities are not prevented from worship if a *minyan* cannot be formed.

In short, at times of intense religious practice for particular festivities that may coincide, the possibility of an incompatible timetable cannot be ruled out. This would most probably be extremely difficult to solve when only one of such spaces is available.

The issue of position during worship

Another question that may give rise to a major incompatibility in space usage, especially if the rooms are used several times a day, is the position of worshippers and officiants during the ceremony. There are two main categories:
- religions in which acts of worship involve participants using chairs, low benches or the like and enter using footwear. This group includes most Christian denominations, Jews and followers of religions or religious groups with a strong European or Western leaning.
- religions in which followers sit directly on the floor and remove their footwear before entering the place of worship. Muslims, most types of Buddhists, Hindus and followers of eastern and African (and generally ethnic) religions usually fit into this group.

Both categories have different management and hygiene needs. The second requires the floor to be cleaned more frequently than the first. Users sit either directly on the floor or on carpets, prostrate themselves or kneel down and touch the floor with their heads - greater hygiene is therefore essential.

In fact, combining forms of worship in which some participants enter fully shod while others go barefoot means that floors must be kept spotlessly clean. Furniture is an added issue because chairs and low benches must be easily removable to make way for carpets or other floor coverings.

Other elements for a neutral design in MBS/MFS

Where the layout and general design of these spaces are concerned, the variability between and within religions is such that, save the odd exception, no formula will cause problems. Moreover, in the event of such exceptions arising, they usually require architectural solutions that are both complex and costly. For example, the cross floor plan might not be welcomed by non-Christians in a MBS/MFS. Besides, this form is not easily adaptable to the rest of the architectural design of a standard centre, and the dead space it creates is uneconomic.

The design tends to be more circular (hexagonal, octagonal), since the differential orientation between the various religious options is considered simpler for these kinds of spaces. In countries like the United States of America or Russia, which are so vast that

Muslims, for example, may pray in different directions depending on where they are in the country, these formats could provide a useful formula when homogenising plans, despite being more expensive to build because of the dead space they create and the complexity of adapting them to other building designs. In their favour, however, it must be said that round or octagonal buildings are undeniably pleasing to the eye, quite singular and even symbolic. They could be an option to bear in mind since such buildings are particularly remarkable or when the potential representative nature that is desired of the space, for instance in architectural settings of special interest and protection, requires higher investment.

In most cases the best option will always be the simplest: the one that most easily adapts to the space available, does not fall out of line with the rest and presents a certain harmony. Square floor plans are usually more appropriate, as orientation is not so defined as in rectangular layouts, and indicating the approximate location of the *kiblah*, the direction of Jerusalem or the East on one of the four walls will always be simple.

The spaciousness of the room is also important to bear in mind. These rooms cannot be of ridiculous proportions, as this might be dissuasive, since decorum is a key factor in worship. Added to this aspect of decorum is the importance of meticulous hygiene in MBS/MFS. Moreover, for Muslims, a place with access to running water is vital because they need to wash certain parts of the body before prayers. In general, the location of toilets with running water close to these spaces should suffice.

It is also necessary to provide a small piece of furniture where shoes can be left at the entrance, as occurs in Hindu places of worship, Buddhist meditation centres, or mosques (among other places), where users sit on the floor.

Another factor that should be contemplated is soundproofing. Certain ceremonies may include prayers, chants, bell-ringing or drums, which could be a source of annoyance outside the rooms. At hospitals, in particular, but generally in many other places, such sounds can be disturbing, and the interests of other users must also be safeguarded. Soundproofing must be thorough and should include the ceilings. This may seem an insignificant detail, but making these spaces truly acceptable is anything but trivial. Noise can lead to rejection and may even result in the stigmatisation of users, not because they are noisy but because they are religious, which in turn might lead to a general desire for the disappearance of these rooms and the relegation of religion to the strictly private sphere.

Another important requirement in multi-belief/multi-faith—and therefore shared—spaces, is the provision of a storage room where the objects and materials needed for worship can be kept. This place could also be used as an office-cum-cloakroom and lockable lockers could be installed for each of the different confessions. The availability of lockers for all religious groups is essential to ensure that the space is kept free of specific symbols. This would ensure complete neutrality and anyone, including individuals with no specific religious profiles, could enter when no ceremony is being held, without feeling awkward. The storage room would house the equipment needed by some faiths for the main role and position of the officiant. Such equipment could comprise a portable bookstand and a table on wheels (easy to transport and to lock into position), for use as an altar, for all faiths that require one.

For religions in which confessions (or similar practices) are made, a small area should be provided, in addition to a structure, in the shape of a folding screen, for example, that can easily be moved and stored away when not in use. Spiritual care and counselling, which is a fundamental practice in hospitals and prisons, may also require a special area

reserved for anyone who might request it. A sort of movable folding screen should also be provided for religions in which participants may wish to divide the worship space for different reasons (separation of genders, for example, circumventing the prevailing Muslim tendency towards the masculinization of MBS/MFS).

The points outlined above show that combining different uses of MBS/MFS is a juggling act; the various confessions and the means available for implementing and managing them mean that these spaces are difficult to handle to the satisfaction of all.

Neutral MBS/MFS: design proposals

Below is a proposal for two design models of MBS/MFS that may adequately address the challenges and problems outlined above, in order to create areas that are truly neutral, non-religiocentric and functional.

Accordingly, these spaces would be shared by all confessions wishing to use them, while simultaneously serving as quiet rooms or rooms of silence for users who do not subscribe to any particular religion. Management, cleaning and administration would fall to the managers and administrators of the centres in which these spaces are located. Of course, all symbols and objects specific to each confession would be portable, removed and stored away in lockable storage areas after each session.

Model 1: two rooms, one with chairs and one without

The space would be divided into two rooms, following completely neutral guidelines and dividing the users depending on the position they adopt during worship or the time spent in quiet reflection, rather than on the religion they profess.

One room with chairs or low benches would be for those faiths that make use of these items in their worship, and for individuals seeking a space to sit for quiet reflection. The number of chairs could be based on the average number of probable users, which would depend very much on the size and characteristics of the centre in which the room is located. The other room without chairs would be used by those who usually sit directly on the floor and remove their footwear before entering, as well as by anyone wishing to use that chairless space for quiet reflection. Separating these rooms would be the storage area and a small office or room for more private conversations. The storage area does not need to be very large, and should have enough space for a desk, altar table, portable bookstand, and secure lockers for the objects that would be used by each religious confession. The rooms would have no distinguishing references other than a sign on the wall, indicating the direction of Mecca and Jerusalem, and another indicating East (or any other direction).

This is a very simple design, adaptable as a standard architectural solution that may be proposed for centres that would benefit from having a MBS/MFS. It only needs to fit out two soundproof square rooms, separated by a storage room-cum-office accessible from both sides. Orientation towards the East and Mecca-Jerusalem would need to be indicated on the walls with no doors. Perhaps the wall opposite the entrance would be the most suitable for this purpose, although the side wall might also be an option if the position of the rooms within the centre as a whole made this possible. The advantages of this model are that they solve the following issues:

- The main problems of conflicting times that might arise. The question of repeated usage of the space without chairs in the afternoon/evening might be easily solved between Muslims and other users (Buddhists, Hindus, etc.), who could make free use of the room in the morning. It is also worth noting that, since the times of use by Muslims are not very long (except on Fridays at midday and certain festivities), anyone wishing to use the space for quiet reflection would have plenty of opportunity to do so. It could even be used for this purpose when the other room is occupied (and vice versa). The room with chairs might also be more convenient, even in the afternoons. It would be much easier to draw up an annual timetable, which could incorporate Jewish community evening rituals, as well as other ceremonies in the afternoon/evening slot.

- Problems arising from the need to ensure meticulous hygiene in a room that welcomes both shod and barefooted users.

- The logistics of having to empty the room of chairs for users who do not require them, while providing a small storage space for trouble-free management, should be met.

Model 2: two rooms connected by a sliding door

The main drawback when designing the type of double room outlined above, however, is that it will only house a certain number of users, which becomes problematic for high-attendance ceremonies. Evidently an open-plan area will accommodate more people than two smaller rooms. This is possibly one of the reasons behind the global practice of providing a single MBS/MFS. But perhaps the main criticism that could be targeted against single rooms is that, if no special care is taken with them, management tends to be neglectful because of the complexity of reconciling different users and their requirements. Such spaces are often badly structured and untidy: carpets are laid in one part and chairs placed in another, the floor is never clean enough for users who worship in a sitting position or prostrate, the chairs are too close together and uncomfortable, and organising timetables is nightmarish. Potential users are deterred and these spaces are eventually abandoned or underused.

One possible solution would be to implement two square rooms and incorporate a sliding partition, which could be pulled back in exceptional circumstances of high use to create a single large space. The only major setback to this solution would be the difficulty of providing adequate soundproofing for both rooms, and for two different groups of users, when the sliding partition is in place.

A further problem involves the location of the storage room-cum-office, which cannot now be placed between both rooms, with the ensuing loss of soundproofing that this would have provided. Given that users who need to fetch large objects (such as the altar or the bookstand) would be using the room provided with chairs, the solution would be to ensure that this space was adjacent to the storage room-cum-office.

In the event of the combined space being used for worship on a larger scale, the main direction would be the shortest side of the rectangle that does not house the entrance to the storage room-cum-office. A thorough cleaning service would be required, however, after any extensive use of a large open-plan area.

Conclusion: the need for a pragmatic and inclusive approach

Throughout this paper, we have stressed the importance of designing multi-belief/multi-faith rooms as neutral spaces (contra: Walker 2012 from a religiocentric point of view). Neutrality is certainly the main factor to be taken into consideration in contexts distinguished by religious diversity like the ones outlined here. But we can never ignore the fact that perfect neutrality (beyond functional and operational neutrality) is not possible, particularly in these kinds of spaces, placed in highly specific locations. The power of the global angle, however, and its tendency toward universal models, which inevitably makes us consider this issue from a worldwide perspective, comes up against the force of local and national thinking. This can be influential and result in the design, setup and management of MBS/MFS being adapted to local contexts and their concrete needs. The weight of history and of material and non-material heritage is a key factor in the process of converting these areas into truly operational multi-use spaces, which calls for a firm pragmatic approach. The models outlined above are undoubtedly the most suitable and neutral from a theoretical perspective and the most likely to be implemented in any country and in any specific context (fit for all kinds of centres whatever the location).

But there will be times when they cannot be the chosen option. Spain is a case in point: the significance of the Catholic heritage in these kinds of centres is often considerable (hospitals, military quarters, airports and universities house Catholic chapels of great artistic and historical value, and frequent use), therefore a wider range of solutions is required (Díez de Velasco 2012a, with a typology of ten possibilities from the full confessional to the disappearance of these spaces). A pragmatic and contextual approach, with a detailed analysis of each centre and its specific circumstances, must take precedence in order to ensure that MBS/MFS will be investment for the future that can satisfy the greatest number of potential users' needs without causing conflict.

For this reason it is so important to insist that these kinds of spaces also meet the needs of those who seek areas for quiet reflection and silence but do not adhere to any particular religion. Therefore, structuring our societies along multi-religious lines would also embrace non-religious persons —often rendered invisible by those who defend religious stances— and who may feel ill-treated by being silenced (Díez de Velasco 2012b: 234-238). Instead of demanding the removal of spaces susceptible to being used for religious purposes in hospitals, airports, military quarters or prisons in particular, the inclusion of individuals who consider themselves as non-religious in these initiatives, might cause them to also support such initiatives rather than oppose them, thereby embracing cooperation rather than confrontation.

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