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# Redesigning Everyday Practices Toward Sustainability

## Potentialities and Limitations of a Community Kitchen

**Lennah Kuskoff**

Lennah Kuskoff is an interior designer and educator. She currently teaches in the undergraduate program of Design Futures at Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, Brisbane. She holds a Master of Design Futures with Honors and her research interests are related to theories of hospitality in regards to sustainment. [l.kuskoff@griffith.edu.au](mailto:l.kuskoff@griffith.edu.au)

**ABSTRACT** In response to the emerging practice of design psychology as a pathway to designing “otherwise,” this article critiques the everyday practices related to food production and consumption that are taken for granted by certain sectors of Western society. Under the imperative of sustainment, the ways in which commodities are engaged are called into question through problematization of the domestic kitchen and interrogation of the practices of a community kitchen. This reveals that reliance on, and desire for, commodity in the kitchen, stemming from the related processes of industrialization, capitalism, and design are ultimately contributing to a loss of ability and cognizance in world making. Discussion of the larger sociocultural and environmental

effects of reliance on commodity in everyday food practices is then translated into suggested objectives or possible pathways for redirection in the remaking of the kitchen construct. The article highlights that designing “otherwise” requires people to rethink what they already know and see new affordances in objects, practices, themselves, and others. It suggests that humanity begins to embrace and design for the concept of public space and common property as a legitimate and necessary alternative to commodity consumption; connect to the world of our dependence and community through the sharing of knowledge, produce, space, and food; and engage with “convivial” tools that allow for autonomous cultural production and allow us to make, evaluate, and remake our world.

KEYWORDS: everyday practices, commodity, community practices, kitchen

### **Introduction by Eleni Kalantidou**

*Design psychology doesn't exist. Not yet, anyway. Developing a field that has been abstractly there through its casual appropriation by different disciplines and practitioners but never present as a means to improve (developed) humans' qualitative behavior, has been a task that slowly and steadily moves forward through theoretical explorations and research projects. As part of the course “Investigative Procedures in Design” at Queensland College of Art, Brisbane, graduate students tried to translate their understanding of the introductory paper “Design Psychology: Exploring the Human Dimension of Designing ‘Otherwise’” (Kalantidou 2013) into case studies so as to question how intertwined are human behaviors and social predispositions with design choices, which lead to consumption choices eventually turning into involuntary destruction choices. A case in point is the following study, conducted by Lennah Kuskoff, which aimed to challenge contemporary understandings of domestic configurations and predefined schemata of domesticity by assessing the culture of a communal kitchen in an urbanized setting of a Western country (Brisbane, Australia). Her essay provides a brief evaluation and a critique of the current form of a design paradigm that has the potential to enable everyday practices relevant to conditions of unsettlement and precarious survival; most importantly, it reveals the confined nature of being plural singular.<sup>1</sup>*

*Note:* Eleni Kalantidou, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia

The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobiles, hi-fi sets, split-level homes, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced.

(Marcuse 1964: 9)

For many, the concept of the kitchen is a familiar one; it conjures images of home and feelings of comfort and nostalgia. As today's emphasis on kitchen design, modification, and personalization attests, the modern kitchen forms a substantial part of the everyday realities of those who dwell in privileged Western societies. For an object as culturally significant and ubiquitous as the kitchen, we maintain a take-it-for-granted attitude that leaves no room for critical reflection. We successfully negate the relation our everyday practices in the kitchen have to the larger social and environmental issues affecting the world.

As the condition of unsettlement<sup>2</sup> becomes more apparent – evidenced by the growing concern over global inequity, geopolitical tensions, environmental disasters, social fragmentation, and the loss of traditional cultural values and practices – certain social and environmental values have been encapsulated by some sectors of Western society and elevated morally. Unfortunately, such moral elevation, although stemming from genuine feeling, often produces only superficial outcomes (Hochschild 2003: 142–5). Socially and environmentally responsible attitudes are rarely reflected in behaviors on a fundamental level for two significant reasons. The first is dependence on material, technological, and service-based commodities to fulfill needs (Giddens 1990: 21–36): a condition that has removed social processes from local contexts of interaction and reorganized them around systems that cross “indefinite spans of time and space” (Giddens 1990: 21). The second, as a consequence of this restructuring, is the experience of disconnection between the mode of human being and our condition of dependence on the biophysical world, the self, and community. Until humankind is able to disengage with commodity, recognize the insufficiency of the individual to sustain him or herself, and begin to invest in resources with sustaining potential (such as human and social capital), we cannot begin to negotiate sustainable everyday practices.

In order to begin to deal with the issue of unsettlement and sustainability, design's complicity in the perpetuation of unsustainable behavior must also be recognized. As Eleni Kalantidou explains in her essay on design psychology, until now design research's function has been to generate decontextualized and generalizable information to fortify society's attachment to commodity and validate the claim that design solves human problems (Kalantidou 2013: 2). However, as consumption of designed commercial goods accelerates, so too

does the uptake of scarce resources in the processes of production, the inevitable pollutants, the consequential climate impacts, and the creation of waste as the old is discarded to make room for the new. These kinds of actions contribute to the destruction of the conditions that make this world habitable (Fry 2009). Without these conditions we cannot survive, and so it follows that the devastating nature of the kind of design that leads to these outputs must be addressed.

In response to this imperative, the emerging field of design psychology seeks to create a new paradigm of design and design research that will address the concerns of unsustainability and unsettlement. It aims to do this by helping designers “recognize their capacity for redesigning the ‘designed,’ by giving alternative significations to things and spaces, so as to prompt investment in psychosocial instead of material capital; and committing psychic energy to well-being, knowledge and social support, rather than to commodities and services” (Kalantidou 2013: 1–2). This article intends to make a contribution to this by initiating research and opening discussion around redesigning the primary domain of the everyday practice of food production and consumption: the kitchen. It will explore the modern construct of the kitchen, define its problematic aspects, and then continue to present a case study on the investigation of a community kitchen’s practices so as to determine its potential to contribute to sustainable modes of living.

The first point to make in this exploration is that our current, uncritical relationship with the modern kitchen did not arrive at one particular moment. Instead it was gradually molded by the political, technological, and social climate of the last two centuries. The first major influential event was the technological innovation of the Industrial Revolution. The systems and machinery developed in this era enabled the completion of previously time-consuming and physically demanding tasks using a fraction of the usual time and animate labor (Warf 2010). Before long, industrialized agricultural processes, preservation and packaging factories, and large-scale networks of food distribution made possible the year-round availability of “fresh” and packaged food from the supermarket. Meanwhile, within the home, multitudes of convenience appliances began to replace the human hand in the practices of preparing, preserving, and cooking food, as well as the consequent cleaning (Schwartz Cowan 1976). As a consequence of industrialization, the entire process of food production through to consumption and the relation of people to these processes became altered.

The second major development in the making of the modern kitchen was the era of American postwar capitalism. As part of America’s response to both the Second World War and the Cold War, the household kitchen was used as a familiar figure to influence public opinion and became the stage on which the nation’s identity was shaped (Oldenziel and Zachmann 2009: 1–29). To achieve the state’s goals of economic stimulation and reinforcement of

anticommunist ideals, politicians and corporations used the kitchen to foreground the “abundance of consumer society” (Oldenziel and Zachmann 2009: 17), elevate the importance of the individual, and instate the notion of conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899) as *the* indicator for success. These requirements of a capitalist economy then effectively worked to undermine the potential development of alternative kitchen constructs that were being explored at the time.

Among these alternatives, “the kitchenless home movement,” supported by prominent feminists such as Dolores Hayden (Hayden 1981), is notable because it resisted the idea of the kitchen as a private and individualized space. By drawing on practices of co-operative housekeeping, the idea aimed to liberate women from domestic servitude and free them to engage in paid work and other nondomestic experiences (Scanlon 2004: 4). However, the emancipation of the oppressed housewife by means of a system based on shared tasks and facilities was countered by the state’s proposal that appliances would better serve as liberator. Simultaneously, new professionals were devising new domains of expert knowledge (such as appliance manufacturers and modernist designers who constructed “houses as machines for living in” (Le Corbusier 1986: 107) that effectively nullified the traditional knowledge and skills of the housewife. Ultimately, postwar capitalism became responsible for the rise of the individual consumer over ownership in common, reliance on commercial products, and the normalization of a private kitchen complete with modular appliances.

Our understanding of what a kitchen is and does is the result of a cultural construct; it was never an absolute, the twin processes of industrialization and commodification in fact designed it. Until now, it has remained unquestioned, concealed by the facade of social acceptability. But is what we consider to be acceptable or reasonable necessarily relevant to the world we dwell in? In the case of the kitchen, our reliance on commodities and our expectation of exclusive use is not only irrelevant but also extremely problematic when understood in relation to the larger social and environmental ecologies.

The territorialization<sup>3</sup> of the kitchen by the capitalist state has led to a conflict between the perceived spatial role of the kitchen and the actual sociocultural processes that occur in the space. Although the kitchen is perceived as a place for cultural production, actions indicate that it is more often used as a space for product consumption. This is due to the kind of relationship maintained with the commoditized technologies in the kitchen. In *Tools for Conviviality*, Ivan Illich discusses the phenomenon particular to industrialized society where the way in which a technology or system is engaged “frustrates the end for which it was originally designed and then rapidly becomes a threat to society itself” (Illich 1973: 11). In the case of the kitchen, technologies are relied upon in order to “save” time that will allow more quality time to pursue leisure activities or to strengthen

morally elevated social relations, such as familial and community bonds (Schwartz Cowan 1976: 2). However, this time “saved” is usually spent in one of two ways: on working, in order to secure the means to acquire the expensive appliances and convenient meals (Hochschild 2003: 148), or on activities that lack social utility, such as “couch time” or “retail therapy.”

Such activities actually valorize individualism, the disposable, and the new and feed back into cycles of consumption and inevitable waste. As such, actions in relation to the kitchen can be directly linked to the fragmentation of community and the problematic expectations of disposability and instantaneity that exacerbate resource depletion, waste creation, and the destruction of the natural environment. So if communities and destructive dispositions toward materiality are to be repaired, the perception of commodity in the kitchen must be recoded.

The other issue that needs to be addressed is the perceptible gap in knowledge and ability that reliance on commoditized and industrialized tools of food production has created in relation to nutrition and the preparation, preservation, and cooking of food for consumption. The constant designing of new technologies to fill this gap only serves to widen it, as the opportunity for individuals to learn and perform the tasks for themselves is eliminated. Growing dependence on food production technologies is contributing to a process of deskilling, which is accelerating in modern societies that are reliant on technology to fulfill basic needs.

As a result of the deskilling process, loss of physical skill and practical knowledge serves to limit the perception of alternate affordances<sup>4</sup> in things and further disconnect humanity from the physicality and materiality of our existence. The danger of becoming ever more detached from what it takes to constitute our everyday reality is that we will become ever more incapable of producing, evaluating, or remaking it. This situation highlights the importance of systems of informal knowledge exchange that transfer the task of making everyday realities back to the community and the self and in so doing, contribute to the dual projects of recoding the kitchen and repairing community and perceptions (of both materiality and affordances).

If the necessity of addressing unsustainability in everyday realities is to be accepted, it must be recognized that the type of issues just discussed remain significantly under-addressed in the current theory and practice related to design and the domestic sphere. Historicized accounts of kitchen development and aesthetic approaches to kitchen design are readily available; however, what is lacking and urgently needed is theoretically informed commentary and research on the kitchen, which recognizes it as a relationally complex socio-technological system that requires problematization and redirection. The nature and consequence of the kitchen needs to be properly understood if it is to be consciously directed toward sustainment.<sup>5</sup> To begin designing the kitchen “otherwise” it is possible to stimulate the

process through the exploration of alternate contexts and practices that suggest sustainable potential. Investigation into such areas will help to determine the way in which sustainable everyday practices in relation to food production and consumption might be developed so as to be accessible, effective, and replicable (Manzini and Meroni 2007: 240).

With these larger objectives in mind, a case study was developed that sought to investigate alternative practices from which to develop platforms for sustainable behaviors and attitudes toward the kitchen. The study focused on a Queensland-based community kitchen because the implied communal practices indicated an alternate approach to the private, individualized norm of a modern domestic kitchen. Qualitative data was collected, including photographs of the community kitchen space, its artefacts and surrounds, documents created by the community kitchen group, and accompanying field notes. Using a semiotic approach, the images were analyzed in conjunction with the supporting documentation. The analysis focused on determining how the community kitchen helped to shape participants' understanding of sustainable everyday practices in relation to the activities performed in the kitchen space, and more specifically, if the investment in human and social capital inherent in communal practices served to displace connection to commodity.

The community kitchen operated from a repurposed space as part of a not-for-profit neighborhood center and accommodated groups of six to ten people who came together on a weekly basis to prepare and share meals. The groups used the space to budget for and organize shopping, to prepare and cook the ingredients, and to distribute the final meal among members. Physically, the space contained all the items one would commonly associate with a kitchen: two stainless-steel benches occupied the center of the room and around the perimeter were arranged such things as a stove oven with a range hood, a dishwasher, a fridge, a microwave, an electric jug, a toaster, a radio, a coffee grinder, a commercial coffee machine, and an air-conditioning unit. Chairs and trestle tables were stacked in a corner by a storeroom and pantry. Inside both the pantry and the fridge, shelves were stacked with half-used, poorly stored packaged foodstuffs. Utensils, pots, pans, cutlery, crockery, and various electrical and mechanical appliances were housed in the storeroom.

From this description, the appliances and packaged foodstuffs observed in the community kitchen could be considered just as profligate as in a regular household kitchen (if not more so in some cases). As such, they posed a similar threat to skills and knowledge relating to food. Deskilling as a process by which skills and knowledge are unused and so forgotten was suggested by the visibility of such objects. For example, the presence of a food processor meant basic motor skills such as chopping, grinding, mixing, and crushing etc. could be bypassed in favor of a press of a button. In comparison, to press a button would certainly require less exercise



of cognitive and physical ability. Another representation of deskilling was indicated by the use of packaged chicken stock. By outsourcing the entire process of making the stock to a company, the physical skill as well as the knowledge in relation to ingredients and cooking processes is removed from the equation. Value in organic material such as bones, peelings, and offcuts typically used to make stock is also lost, as instead of being utilized, they become waste material in favor of the “time-saving” “Real Stock.”<sup>6</sup>

Although the objects within the community kitchen signified the perpetuation of deskilling, the project of re-skilling was actually the platform on which the communal kitchen showed the most sustainable promise. The location of the kitchen next to a community garden delivered the potential for the exchange of both material produce and informal knowledge between those cooking food and those growing it. Close physical proximity to cultivating food is generally not experienced in the sphere of the household kitchen, especially when one considers the private and individualized kitchens of apartment living in urban environments serviced by the supermarket. It is not a stretch to suggest that the distance experienced between growing food and purchasing it would lead to a fragmented understanding of the connection between the natural environment, its role in the production of food, and humans’ dependence on it for survival (this ultimately promoting the notion of the world as standing reserve<sup>7</sup>). In this respect, the community kitchen’s location provided an opportunity to reconnect to the world of our dependence through education in horticultural skill and social interaction within the community via the transfer of informal knowledge.

While potential to develop community and systems of informal knowledge exchange existed in relation to the kitchen’s surroundings, that which occurred within the kitchen space itself told a different story. The design of the kitchen space for social inclusion (as evidenced by wheelchair access and structural provisions for those who may have been dealing with psychological issues) represented the elevation of values associated with community and social capital, yet the actual practices of the kitchen did little to support these advertised values. Instead, the dissonance between what people think and what they do was highlighted.

Socio-spatial practices of the kitchen were oriented around the capability of appliances rather than the collective abilities of participants. Reliance on mod cons to complete tasks not only suggested the absence of trust in one’s own hand but also a lack of confidence in the knowledge and skills possessed by others in the group. Rather than learning from others and relying on the combined energy of the group to complete tasks, many cooking processes were entrusted to commodities, an indication that the participants did not afford themselves or others complete agency in the vital act of making a meal. Instead of promoting the value of social inclusion and social capital, the culture of consumption and industrial dependence

underpinning the spatial practices of the kitchen ultimately contributed to the impoverishment of community due to the exclusion of social knowledge and exchange from the space, thus inhibiting informal knowledge transfer and practical ability.

The condition of dependence on commodity that led to the process of deskilling in the community kitchen was also linked to the limitation of affordances and the creation of waste. A lack of understanding regarding the skills and processes involved in completing tasks means that the production, evaluation, and redirection of the outcome is restricted and so the possibility of allocating alternate affordances to both objects and activities is lost. A specific outcome of limited affordances in the domestic kitchen is the creation of waste as items are left unused or relegated to the garbage bin instead of being repaired, maintained, or repurposed. New, more desirable products are then brought in to replace the “old” ones. The community kitchen exhibited several examples in which the lack of alternate affordances led to similarly unsustainable outcomes, especially in relation to appliances and utensils (such as those consigned to the back of the cupboard because they replicated the result of another), food (such as scraps from food preparation), and practices (such as the acts of maintenance and repair).

Indications were found that the community kitchen was not able to perceive alternate affordances in objects and allocate them new uses. For example, the mortar and pestle alone could achieve comparable results to the manual salt and pepper grinders, the electric salt and pepper grinders, and the electric food processor, yet all six tools were present. As there is no necessity to possess all of them and none had been repurposed, the excess became the indicator of limited affordances and waste making. In the cases that new use was allocated for what would otherwise be considered waste, the new use did not transcend preestablished understandings of new/reuse. Even composted organic scraps in the community garden did not provide strong enough evidence to suggest the perception of alternate affordances because this kind of waste treatment does not go beyond the typically fragmented understanding of sustainable practices and affordances.

Another example of the inefficient approach to sustainable practice was the lack of maintenance in the kitchen, specifically the poorly stored foodstuff, the broken appliances, and the dust, dirt, and discarded items present. The absence of active care for artefacts revealed standards of disposability and replaceability, embedded in consumerism, that legitimize the waste of objects and their replacement with the “new.” Replacement is perceived as superior to care, partly because it is considered less time-consuming. Such a perception negates the agency of repair and maintenance as time-saving activities in two significant respects. In the conventional sense of time saving, this attitude fails to recognize that time allocated to the repair or maintenance of an item saves time that would otherwise

be used acquiring the means (i.e., working) for its replacement. Under the imperative of sustainability, repair and maintenance are time-saving activities because they reduce the production of waste, thereby decreasing the production of pollutants and the uptake of resources that threaten the environmental conditions on which human-kind depends. In this sense, repair and maintenance save more time for the future. The lack of repair or maintenance practices found in the community kitchen confirmed the suggestion that greater value is perceived in time spent on other things, making it clear that the affordance of time-saving was associated with commodities (which are fundamentally unable to deliver this in either a conventional or sustainable sense) instead of alternate practices.

Ultimately, the case study demonstrated that the community kitchen's practices, considered "alternative" by the general population, may have seemed at first glance to uphold certain moral values and ethical practices, but on the level of action merely replicated the norm of the modern kitchen construct. When the challenges of sustainment are considered, the community kitchen does not go far enough, and is not radical enough to create meaningful and lasting change. However, through analysis of the outcomes of the research project, it was possible to identify objectives to be addressed in the redesign of the kitchen as well as any potential for redirection within the community kitchen's practices. It was determined that the redesign of the kitchen would need to facilitate disconnection from commodity and reconnection to the self, the community, and the world of our dependence through the recoding and remaking of the kitchen's spatial role. This could be done by facilitating a system of informal knowledge exchange through the elimination of unnecessary commodities from the kitchen space, connection from the kitchen to the site of food production, and the recoding of the kitchen as a public domain.

The fact that the communal practices and community values the community kitchen held were undermined by their dependence on commodities indicates that believing in the value of human and social capital is not enough to displace connection to commodity on the level of action. Designers need to engage in direct confrontation with commodities by eliminating the kitchen's functional dependence on it, in a significant capacity. Obviously, tools will still be required to complete certain tasks; however, these tools need to be "convivial" (Illich 1973): they need to become a means for autonomous cultural production and the exercise of skill rather than an end in themselves. By designing the kitchen and its tools in this way, reliance on human and social capital will be encouraged as will the project of re-skilling. In turn, re-skilling enables understanding related to the production, evaluation, and redirection of outcomes and so the possibility of discovering new affordances for things. This would go toward the imperative of learning to make the world "otherwise" through the repair, maintenance, and new use/ reuse of that which we already

have rather than disposal and replacement, stemming the flow of waste creation.

The project of re-skilling could also reach beyond the kitchen and into the garden. Connection from the kitchen to the site of food production would potentially create a conduit for the exchange of knowledge and skills relating to food-growing practices as well as an opportunity to repair the understanding of human connection to, and dependence on, the natural world. Perhaps the potential of the community kitchen lies in the possibility that it can provide education in horticultural skills through the transfer of informal knowledge within communities, aiding in both the strengthening of community and the ability to constitute everyday realities.

Finally, as the communal kitchen demonstrated practices that suggested its social processes were overly determined by consumer culture's elevation of the individual and dependence on commodities, rather than reliance on community, it is suggested that the kitchen space needs to be re-territorialized as a public space if community is to be formed through it in a significant and enduring capacity. The recoding of the kitchen as public space directly opposes the current norm of a private, individual room in a private home. As such it is a large task, one that warrants further investigation and theorization before it can be put into practice. In fact the entire redesign of the kitchen construct this article has suggested is no small feat, but it is important to remember that at no point was the understanding of the kitchen today assumed to be "a given"; it was and still is a social construct that depends on the vagaries of many factors.

As we face the very real possibility of disaster brought on by geopolitical, social, and environmental conditions, current everyday food practices and relationships to the kitchen will be disrupted. Knowledge of food-growing practices will become increasingly important as global issues of food scarcity and climate change destabilize the food system presently relied on. The ability to prepare and preserve foods also becomes ever more necessary as the rising demand for energy and rapid decrease of resources suggests that the means and materials required to operate our factories and household appliances will eventually become unavailable, thus rendering the physical task of cooking possible only through the use of human energy.

The reality is that in the foreseeable future, the responsibility may fall to the individual and their community to supplement the decreasing availability of certain foods or constitute their entire diet from what they have grown and prepared themselves. As a proactive human role becomes ever more integral to the processes of constituting our everyday realities, it is not *what* we can turn to in order to overcome these obstacles, but *whom*. Rather than waiting for these conditions to be actualized, we can start adapting to them in advance. Creating a new norm that anticipates the coming changes and disruptions will enable us to mitigate, or ideally avoid, socially destructive and

environmentally damaging outcomes. It is time to begin designing the kitchen “otherwise.”

### Notes

1. Rephrasing the title of Jean-Luc Nancy’s book *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).
2. Unsettlement is the growing human condition and deepening psychology in response to the failures of the project of modernity. It describes the sense of uncertainty as to how we will deal with our future, both individually and collectively; it is a condition more often experienced than spoken. See Fry (2011).
3. Deleuze and Guattari describe territorialization as the delineation of spatial boundaries by the state in relation to the sociocultural processes that occur within that space. In contrast, de-territorialization refers to the weakening or disintegration of those ties between state philosophy and place, which then in turn leads to re-territorialization, being the redesignation of spatial boundaries and the accompanying social and cultural understanding of that space. The recognition that spatial formations and their connections to sociocultural meaning are fluid rather than static is central to the understanding of de-/re-territorialization. This explanation is derived from the succinct description of “Territorialization” in the *Dictionary of Human Geography*. See Gregory et al. (2009: 745–6).
4. Affordances are related to the values we perceive in objects, people, and situations. Being able to recognize alternate affordances in things is indivisible from being able to design the world in another way. This is a synthesis of ideas presented by multiple authors. See Arturo Escobar (2007: 179–210), James J. Gibson (1986), François Jullien (1995), Donald Norman (2002), Juhani Pallasmaa (2009), and Richard Sennett (2008).
5. “Sustainment” is used to designate the larger project of sustainability in relation to its environmental, social, political, economic, and cultural complexity. It is used in contrast to the shallow ecology of the word “sustainability,” which is understood in a generally green-washed and altruistic way. See Fry (2009, 2011).
6. A reference to *Campbell’s Real Stock*, a prepackaged meat and vegetable stock product available in Australian supermarkets.
7. Martin Heidegger posits that man perceives the world as a “standing reserve”: an endless supply of resources that exists exclusively to fulfill his own ends. This notion contributes to de-futuring circumstances because it negates man’s responsibility to preserve the environmental conditions fundamental to his continued existence within the world. See Heidegger (1977).

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