

SCHOLAR ARCHITECT 2021

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COORDINATOR: Anda-Ioana SFINTEȘ

TRANSLATED BY Florina TUFESCU

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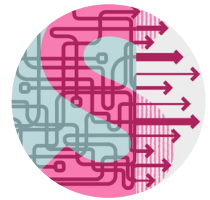
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Improving the quality of research and teaching
in architectural education

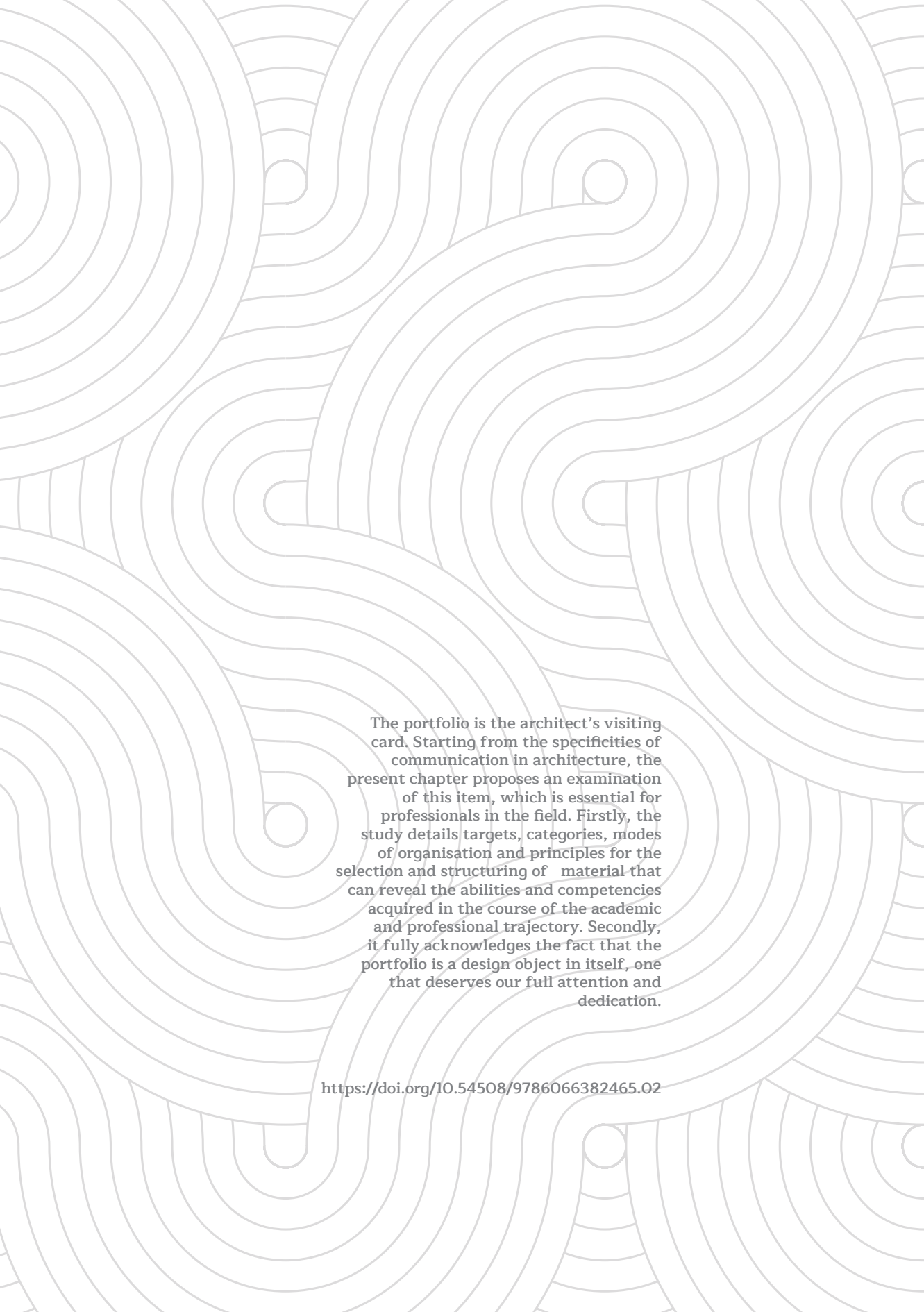
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The portfolio is the architect's visiting card. Starting from the specificities of communication in architecture, the present chapter proposes an examination of this item, which is essential for professionals in the field. Firstly, the study details targets, categories, modes of organisation and principles for the selection and structuring of material that can reveal the abilities and competencies acquired in the course of the academic and professional trajectory. Secondly, it fully acknowledges the fact that the portfolio is a design object in itself, one that deserves our full attention and dedication.

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**A discussion about
communication.
Perspectives on the
architecture portfolio**

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Introduction

The relationship between architecture and the sphere of communication is as complex as it is important to our profession. Architectural education opens a horizon that the future professional architects will particularise and nuance upon. It is not by chance that Verzijl asserted that “architecture is above all about communication” (1997, p. ii). The importance of communication in architecture also derives from the fact that we are dealing with a border discipline, with implications in multiple areas of life. The complexity of the phenomena to which architecture must respond creates the necessity of a permanent dialogue both within and outside the profession. In his work titled *Scrisoare către un tânăr arhitect (Letter to a young architect)*, Alexandros N. Tombazis made the following appeal: “Remember that architecture means dialogue. To lead (and you will have to do this) first learn to listen and understand” (Tombazis, 2008, p. 57).

Starting from a few general observations on communication in architecture, this chapter aims to study in greater depth a particular form of communication that is specific to the profession – the student portfolio – by identifying perspectives, principles, directions and resources that can complete the learning methods specific to the profession through complementarity.

The premise – communication in architecture

From an etymological perspective, “communication” stems from the Latin “communis” with the sense of shared, general. A more recent and complex definition describes communication as a social and cognitive process with two components: conveying a message and generating meaning (Maier & Thalmann, 2008).

In a 2015 study, Nima Norouzi (2015) identifies three types of factors that influence communication in architecture. The semantic factors derive from the necessity of the interlocutor's correct decoding of the conveyed message. The second type of factors, namely the emotional, are based on the content of the message and its emotional impact. For successful communication, both types need to be equally addressed and potential discrepancies that can arise in the communication process need to be constantly observed. The third level of influence is the technical one and concerns the structuring of information and its mode of transmission.

From a more radical yet interesting perspective, *The Civilisation of Illiteracy* (Nadin, 1997) places contemporary civilisation beyond language. For Nadin, today's world is "a very fragmented reality of sub-languages, images, sounds, body gestures and new conventions" (Nadin, 1997, p. 26) while alphabets and language are a recent commitment in the history of our species. Visual forms of communication gradually replace written languages: "Images substitute text; sounds add rhythm or nuance; visual representations other than written words become dominant; animation introduces dynamics where written words could only suggest it" (Nadin, 1997, p. 22). On the other hand, the constantly evolving technologies and programs determine a "tangible visuality" (Breen, 2013, p. 27). Dutch professor Jack Breen claims that digital models have become part of the norm over the last decade.

In architecture, there are three categories of processes subjected to communication: descriptive, exploratory and empirical. Descriptive processes presuppose systematic explanation based on argumentation. From this point of view, the project must answer a few fundamental questions: What?, How?, Why?, thus becoming a way of questioning ideas for the development of design alternatives. And this happens also because architecture does not provide a single solution but infinite options of solving problems. The exploratory aspect starts from a series of hypotheses that can be pursued, tested and verified through empirical processes. These hypotheses concern characteristics, effects, conditions and relationships that are directly linked or collateral to the project. The final empirical category illustrates a choice as the consequence of the previous considerations. In architectural education, this testing is carried out through experiments, modelling, visualisations and models that simulate at true scale or at a different scale certain components of the project (relationship to the context, structural aspects, materiality, etc.).

Yet it is the language and the imagery (the text and the images) that remain dominant in the architectural thinking process. These types of language are used to describe and classify objects, to process and subsequently memorise information. As McGlynn (2013) noted, architectural imagery works with real and virtual objects; it thus plays "a role in thinking, allowing us to consider the results of possible transformations and arrangements of objects" (Kosslyn & Rosenberg, 2011, p. 204). The characteristics of imagery allow the extension of space, the limitation of the field of vision, the limitation of resolution as well as working with

visual perception (McGlynn, 2013). The visual, as a condensed form of information, facilitates the transfer of complex and ample information as synthetic, essentialised mental images. In addition to these information-processing mechanisms, architecture uses interactive drawing as a way of expanding cognitive abilities. Drawing is the means through which reality in its concrete form is turned into a more abstract, essentialised shape, through processes of selection and interpretation. Creating the drawing and then reading it presupposes a bidirectional translation process between representation and description (Fish & Scrivener, 1990). Herbert (1993) viewed drawing as a means of cyclical interaction between graphic and cognitive processes.

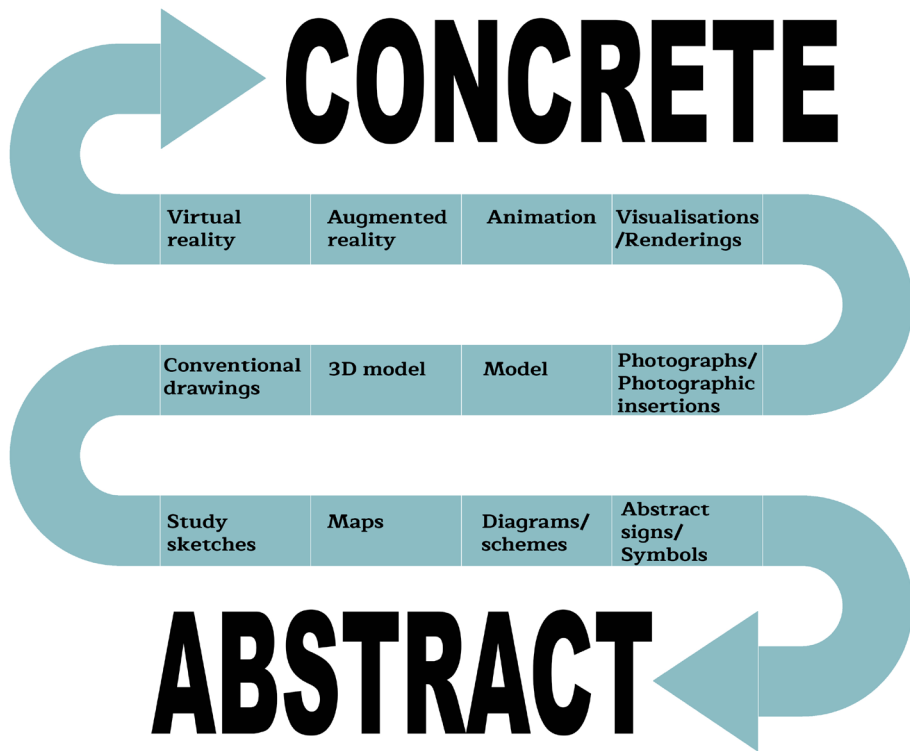


Fig. 1. Architectural representations – From the concrete to the abstract.
© Oana Anca Abălaru Obancea

The portfolio – a special form of communication

In architectural education and subsequently in the professional environment, the portfolio represents a visiting card, an element whose main role is to introduce us to an audience, most often an unknown one. Thus, a first goal of the portfolio is communication (Luescher, 2017). The portfolio therefore becomes an interface aimed at communicating not only achievements but also beliefs, ideas, concerns and aspirations that define the future professional. This process entails corroboration of the visual means (the imagery) by the text and viceversa through the finding of the optimal relation between them.

Simplifying slightly, we can define two main target audiences for the portfolio of a student architect: the academic one over the course of their studies and the professional one. Defining the two is the first and possibly most important step in the preparation of the portfolio since it requires a process of adaptation and adjustment to the particularities of the studio/school of architecture and preliminary research that will serve to guide the entire process of organising and selecting the material.

In addition, the form adopted for the portfolio (book, leaflet, online portfolio that uses dedicated platforms, website, etc.) will generate specific requirements with regard to organisation, presentation and selection.

The design of the portfolio itself is akin to an architectural object; it belongs to the sphere of creation and use (Luescher, 2017). It thus represents an opportunity to highlight the abilities acquired in different areas such as graphic design skills, technical abilities, mastery of complex and varied architectural programmes, curricular and extra-curricular interests from the sphere of architecture and beyond etc. The selection of materials and of projects becomes the primary tool for displaying these abilities.

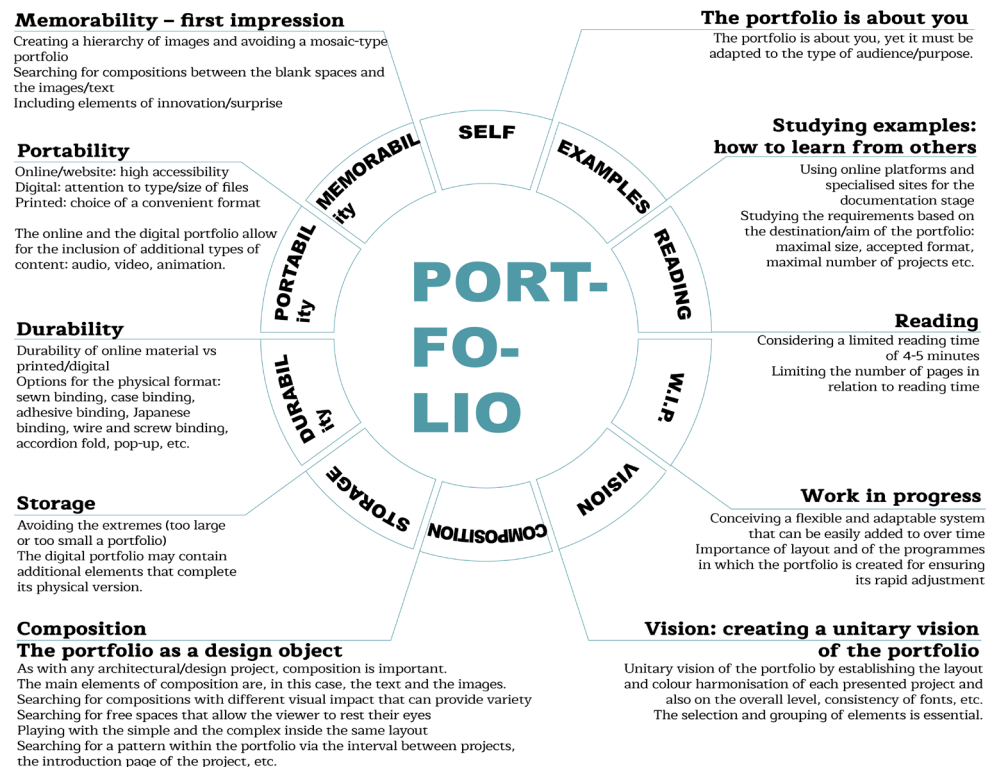


Fig. 2. Principles for the development of the portfolio. © Oana Anca Abălaru Obancea

General principles for the development of the portfolio

It is impossible to speak of a predefined path in the development of the portfolio. Everyone must strike their own path, which best expresses the academic and/or professional stage they are at. The fact that the portfolio mirrors our abilities, competences, interests and vision provides the premise for a unique and original product.

All the principles that will be stated and described in continuation must be related to the purpose and type of portfolio. This is exemplified in Jakob Nielsen's book, *Designing Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity* (2000). Referring in particular to online presentation content, the author mentions four essential principles that should guide this type of presentation interface, with three of these being easily applied to online portfolios: high-quality content, constant updating and ease of access and viewing of the material (Nielsen, 2000).

While far from a complete guide, the diagram in Fig. 2 contains a few elements that have been identified as important in the preparation of an architecture portfolio and it states a few of their possible implications and applications.

Elements of structure, organisation and content

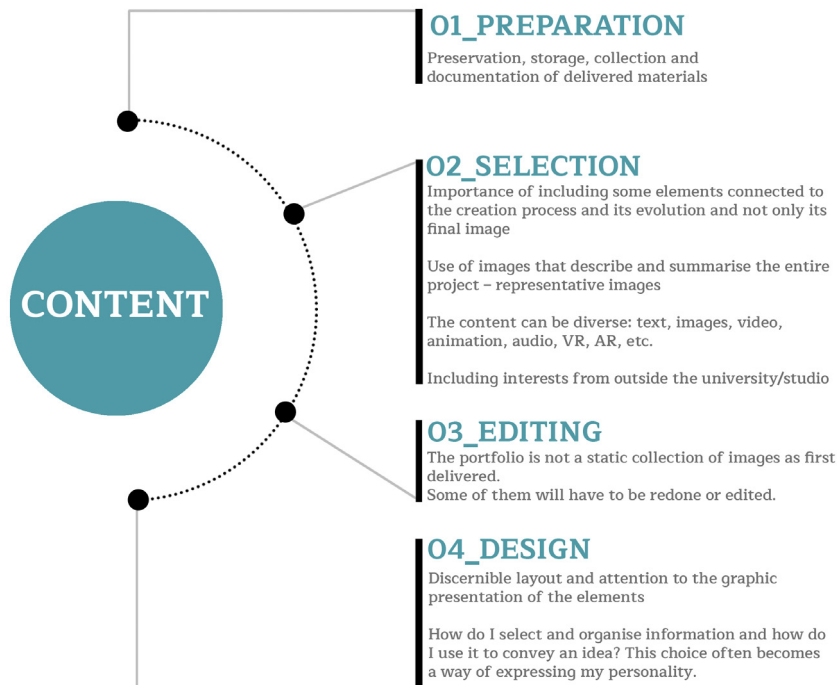


Fig. 3. The contents of the portfolio. © Oana Anca Abălaru Obancea

The portfolio is not a mere collection of projects. Including several projects and interests inside a unitary presentation entails activities of preparation, selection, editing and graphic design. Fig. 3 offers a schematic synthesis of a few processes undergone by the content, prior to the stages of organising and structuring the portfolio.

Structure is important because it establishes specific relationships between the elements without losing track of the goal of the material we are about to create. Defining the structure is a fundamental step in the actual creation of the portfolio. Five vital and recurrent elements can be identified for this particular type of presentation, captured in the illustration below.

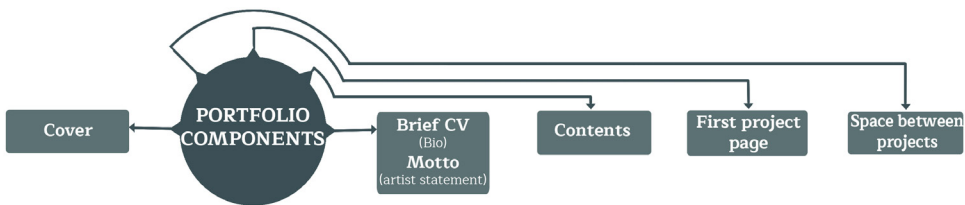


Fig. 4. Elements of structure. © Oana Anca Abălaru Obancea

The mode of organisation refers to setting criteria for the ordering of the previously selected projects. Each of the five types identified has a number of advantages that must be carefully weighed before making a choice:

_Organisation on the basis of complexity and abilities allows for the presentation of those projects that show the maximum level of abilities and competences.

_Organisation into types of work (academic, professional, internship, research, etc.) allows flexibility in the use of the portfolio for multiple purposes.

_Organisation into categories of architecture programmes is especially recommended in the case of very ample project content. It is also frequently the way of systematising projects on the websites of architectural bureaus, in the exhibitions of architectural competitions, etc.

_Organisation on the basis of project localisation is specific to the large architectural bureaus that wish to display their experience in diverse and multiple contexts.

Conclusions

The development of the portfolio is a process that accompanies our entire academic and professional activity. It is in itself a creative act that must, however, communicate experiences and acquired abilities, passions and interests that guide our activity. This particular form of communication has specific requirements and attributes, which should be known. The portfolio has been shown to adopt multiple shapes and contents whose study largely determines the creation of a successful product. This chapter has underlined, grouped and ranked a few elements that are deemed important, thus providing a basis from which the individual creative contribution can begin. Perhaps the most significant conclusion is that the portfolio is an ever perfectible and adaptable material, which evolves alongside the student and the architecture professional.

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