

# Museums without doors

Issue of accessibility of museums in Austria during the COVID-19 pandemic

Museum Studies and Heritage

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## Introduction

The past months have shown that for a museum to simply exist and wait for the visitors to see an exhibition in person is not enough, and especially during the times of travel restrictions and limited visitor numbers endangering its existence. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic around 90% of museums worldwide had to close by May 2020 for several months and some may never re-open again. (UNESCO, 2020, p. 13) However, the discussion about the advent of digitalisation predates a global pandemic and has already found its place in some of the museums worldwide. When the doors of museums worldwide are closed, digital channels enable access to the museum for the user and open many other doors to different opportunities.

In 2019 around 90% of European households have internet access. (Eurostat, 2020) In times of closed museum doors, travel restrictions and movement restrictions, therefore the digital door remains open. According to an international survey by the ICOM already half of the museums who participated stated that they had part of their collection accessible to users on their webpage. During the first phase of lockdown in many countries, around 15 % started or even increased their digital activities during this phase. The most significant growth could be recognised in the field of social media, as around 50% of participants stated to have increased or built their social media presence. (ICOM, 2020, p. 10) The following paper aims to analyse the accessibility and acceptance by the visitors themselves of such digital approaches.

## Focus of this study

Digitisation can be used in a wide range of museum areas, from internal processes and the scientific work of a museum to better communication of the substantial message of the exhibition piece to the visitor. Within the scope of this paper, the focus will be to critically observe how museums attempt to maintain access to their audience during the times of a global pandemic. In a further step, practical examples will give insight into museums' strategies with the geographical focus on Austria. In general, there are many fields where the museum's work had to be adapted to the current situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To stay within a feasible framework, the paper will focus on its influence on the relationship between the visitor and the museums as an institution itself.

## The role of the museum

To analyse the challenges, the pandemic poses to museums in Austria as well as worldwide. It must, first of all, be clarified which tasks a museum has concerning its visitors. In a later step, it can then be discussed to what extent these tasks are succeeded and which strategies have been applied to them. Therefore, the general role of a museum must be defined:

According to ICOM the International Council of museums in 2007 the definition of a museums states as follows:

*"A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment." (ICOM, 2007)*

What stands out with this definition concerning the visitor's role is that the museum is seen as a "service of society" and "open to public". However, it does not state that the museums must be open to the public also on a digital level or where this openness reaches its limit. In 2019 ICOM planned to vote on an updated definition but postponed this vote to a later date due to internal discrepancies. (ICOM, 2019) The quote that was objected to vote but will be further concretised is the following:

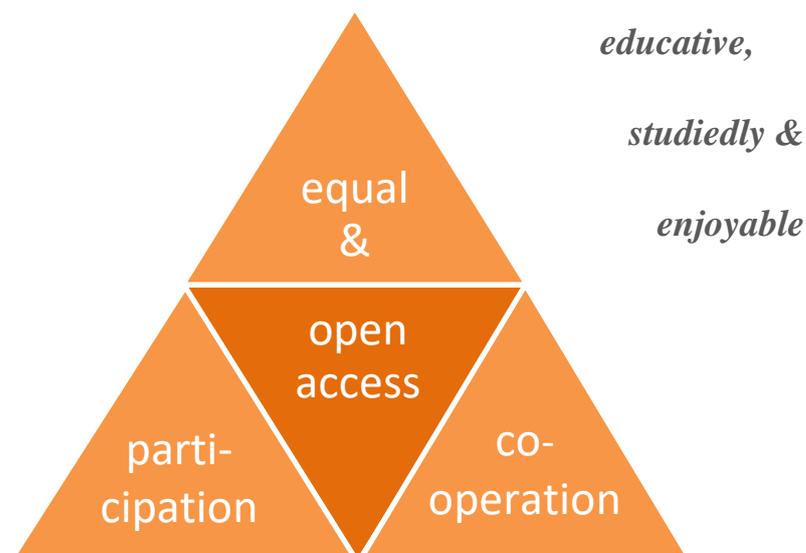
*"Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing".*

This quote likewise does not include the term digitalisation, however, it points out that an "equal access" should be there for all people, such as being "participatory" and "working... with and for diverse communities".

Depending on if one sees the visitor himself as a main benefited from the museum and as a taxpayer in some ways also an owner of the museum, it can be argued that his museum

experience should be the focus of every museum's exhibition. Is this access solely limited to the audience's physical visit or goes it further than the walls of the museum? Does equal access also mean to access the collection when not being able to attend the exhibition physically? Furthermore, is the museum obliged to the requirements of the ICOM according to its definition?

Those posed questions would require further and detailed discussion that go beyond the means of this paper. Therefore, the components of the museum's definition by the ICOM shall be seen as a higher aim, and museums may seek to fit this definition. Offering **equal** and **open access** to the audience and **participation** and **co-operation** to make a museum visit “educative, studiedly and enjoyable.”



As Koller & Kotler outline the opinions over the role of a museum can differ between a more material focused view to an audience favoured one. However, as museums now except other entertainment facilities as competitors partly aiming for the same audience groups, the visitor's role has gained importance over the last decades. Like shopping malls, football clubs and other entertainment facilities have even incorporated exhibitions into their own programs. (Kotler & Kotler, 2000, p. 271) An exhibition is not anymore, a term solely linked to museums or similar institutions.

However, Ballantyne and Uzzell see the driving force for more visitor-focused museum management as a decline in public funds (2011, p. 87). Nonetheless, they support Kotler & Kotler in arguing that the leisure and entertainment sector is getting more and more competitive. Regarding Austria's case, this argument of a recession in public funding cannot

be confirmed, as the states' cultural spending has 2019 with 439,46 million euros (BMKÖS, 2020) reached a new peak for the 4<sup>th</sup> year in a row.

## Museum 2.0

This change in the museum-visitor relationship is strongly under the influence of the digitalisation. Everyday life is becoming more and more digital, whether voluntarily or involuntarily. This development is not only happening on the part of visitors, but museums have been noticing this development, and many adapted their exhibits to this development. In the current discussion of digitalisation in the museum's management field the term "Museum 2.0" can often be found in literature, implying that a completely new period or even "era" has been started.

However, how the audience gets access to a museum's exhibition has not profoundly changed throughout the past despite technological development and remained for a long time as in-house and come and see approach. Through digitalisation, this advancement had no longer been solely restricted to the building of a museum. (Bertacchini & Morando, 2011, p. 3)

Pulh and Mencarelli observed that even the Web has already entered a new 2.0 era, enabling the user with a more active role than just merely being the reader or observer. When differentiating between the "Web 1.0" and "Web 2.0" in the case of this research the "Museum 1.0 or 2.0" the existence of dialogue or interaction between the museums and its audience is the key factor. (Capriotti, Carretón, & Castillo, 2016, p. 98) An institution that has an online presence and is providing the user with content and information about its work is therefore not automatically a Web 2.0. The "degree of interactivity" makes the difference. In the current literature about this degree of interactivity, researchers looked at the how digital elements were used to provide information as well as in a further step used to "allow the exchange of information, debate, discussion & collaboration" (Capriotti et al., 2016, p. 98) between the institution and the user. Although the level of integrity has developed in recent years, only the use of traditional tools can be observed. With social media, for example, connecting and sharing functions are used, but users' direct involvement and tools to assess museums are relatively low. The potential of Web 2.0 is, therefore, not or not sufficiently utilized. (Capriotti et al., 2016, pp. 103–104)

The authors Pulh and Mencarelli, however, observe that such platforms do not engage the user but simply invite to observe. With the development of the Web 2.0 users are encouraged to actually "invite visitors to get involved" and concerning the museum "...offer their own

(visitors), even to create content." Through research in over 60 museums in the EU and US, they derived three forms of visitor participation such as **the communicator-visitor, curator-visitor and artist-visitor**. (2015, pp. 44–45)

Under the term communicator-visitor, they describe visitors' possibility to directly communicate with the museum and other visitors on online platforms. Museum Blogs with comment functions, social media presence or incorporating visitor statements in the museum's marketing campaign are a first step in challenging a more active visitor. However, the control over which comments are shown or how the museums' reputation is presented can be generally controlled by the museum itself.

An even more active role is one of the curators, whereby visitors help the museums management their perception of exhibition pieces by tagging them with keywords. A different variation is the tool of audience voting and creation of an individual and personal collection of art pieces, which gives an insight into the visitor's taste or liking of what is exhibited.

In the third visitor-role, the museum engages the visitor to become an artist himself. This can be in the form of inviting the visitor to share its own pictures of the exhibition to collect it with many others and present it to the general audience. Moreover, incorporating the audience's own artistic creations and incorporating it within the collection is a relatively strong intervening action into the museum management, but not unthinkable.

The three presented forms of visitor participation challenge the long-preserved authority of the museum. However, within a more visitor-focused museums world, they are no longer phantasy but already practised as examples presented by the authors Pulh and Mencarelli.

From a critical point of view, the quality of the content produced by those active visitors cannot be guaranteed. A common fear of museums is that putting visitors on an equal footing with museum professionals would jeopardise their integrity and expertise. (Pulh & Mencarelli, 2015, p. 48)

## COVID-19 and its effect on Austrian museums

In the year 2018, there were 769 museums in Austria, according to Statistic Austria. (2018b) Lower Austria, Upper Austria and Vienna have the largest number of museum facilities in Austria with 140, 149 & 126 museums. The three most frequently visited museums are Schönbrunn Palace, Austrian Gallery Belvedere and the Museum of Art History, all in Vienna. (Statistik Austria, 2018a)

### Effects on the museums' sector

With the First Lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all museums were closed from the 16<sup>th</sup> March until 15<sup>th</sup> May when Museums in Austria were allowed to open again but with consideration of safety regulations.

However, with the second lockdown from 3<sup>rd</sup> November until the 6<sup>th</sup> December and a third Lockdown from 26<sup>th</sup> December to the 24<sup>th</sup> January presumably. This state is currently ongoing and the future developments unclear.<sup>1</sup>

With those three lockdowns, the effects for museums are mostly financial ones as the UNESCO has gathered through a survey. A significant part of their income through ticket sales and non-main activities such as museums, shops or catering (Restaurants, Cafés, for example). In the periods between each lockdown, museums recorded a significant drop in visitor numbers due to a lower tourism volume. Besides the current effects of the pandemic, many institutions will be greatly affected by the economic aftermath. The weak economic situation may influence the financial support on private (donors, sponsors) as well as on public level (national or state funding) (UNESCO, 2020, p. 13)

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<sup>1</sup>During writing-process of this paper the 3<sup>rd</sup> Lockdown was announced to last until the 24<sup>th</sup> January 2021. This date is up to change and further information should be taken from the website of the federal ministry of culture. <https://www.bmkoes.gv.at/en.html>

## Strategies

In the following part three examples of museums in Austria, the Belvedere and the Museum for applied arts are presented to give practical examples of how museums have tried to secure access for their audience during the times of a global pandemic.

### **Belvedere Digital**

The Belvedere Museums in Vienna is one of the most visited museums in Austria. Pre-pandemic the museums have already incorporated digital elements in its exhibition. An increased online appearance was needed through the pandemic to maintain the relationship with its existing visitor base.

The “**Belvedere Digital**”<sup>2</sup> is the name of the different digital tools and material that are presented on their website. Those include online tours given by the curators of the belvedere or artist talks where the artist himself is interviewed. Those are promoted over the Belvedere social media channels on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook and can be viewed on the video platform YouTube.

Through the app called “**Artivive**”, the museum was even before lockdown able to convey and educate way more information than only when the user is observing and looking at the painting. Although this application would only be able to be used when visiting the museum, the Belvedere has added the paintings of Egon Schiele to its webpage so the visitors can even from home explore the art pieces through their phones and an additional second digital device. While the observers hear an audio guide explaining the painting, its history, and findings from the researchers at the museum, a video shows different forms of the painting, such as an x-ray analysis or earlier versions of the painting cannot see by looking at the original. Through the easy handling of the app, besides the digital devices and secure internet connection, online-users can still use this tool and guarantees access even during a pandemic. (Belvedere Museum Wien, 2020)

Especially for the young visitor group with **#KunstpausefürZuhause**<sup>3</sup> (Engl. art break at home) the museum provides free pdfs to print and colour or read at home for young children. The characters and stories of those materials are linked to artworks from the Belvedere collection.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.belvedere.at/digital>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.belvedere.at/kunstpause>



## “Experiments at home”

With its program "**Experimente für Zuhause**" which translates to “experiments at home” the **technical museum in Vienna** offers an introduction about small experiments that can be done at home on their webpage. The experiments generally aim for parents and children. It is in co-operation with the program “Technik kinderleicht” that aims to teach the young audience a basic understanding of technology and natural sciences in a fun and playful environment.

On the website, they invite the parents to share under the hashtags #TechnikKinderleicht or #TechnischesMuseumWien the results of their experiments. However, this promotion stands at the end of the introduction and can easily be overlooked. (Technisches Museums Wien, 2020) Furthermore, there are general workshops from programming to special effects in films explained or practical tutorials for the online visitor to try at home in order to fulfil their educational purpose and ensure entertainment and practical experience for the user.

## MAK Digital

The digital program of the Museum for Applied Arts in Vienna is not only similar to the Digital Belvedere regarding its name but also takes some likewise approaches to ensure museums access to the visitor. Through **audio guides** or videos and part of the MAK collection online, the user can have an inside within the museums from home. Furthermore, the audio series “**Nackdenkerein**” (Engl. reflections) that discusses different pieces of the MAK collection with the voices of actors from the Burgtheater Wien expands the variety of activities for the visitor.

Developed with the Austrian Federal Ministry it aims to “...teach essential topics for shaping the future in times of digital modernity and climate change.” (‘MAK Lab App - MAK Museum Wien’, 2020) Applied and contemporary arts are combined and put into context with digital age and presented for pupils and young adults through a playful and creative way. For example, on the topic of digital life literacy, keywords concerning the digital world are explained simply and understandably for all ages. The digital content can be used through the app as well as on all digital devices such as laptop and tablet. The MAK Lap App is the digital addition to the MAK Design Lap, which exhibits on 2000m<sup>2</sup> design ideas from contemporary artists. The exhibition consists of modern design ideas that contribute or give ideas on a positive future change.

## Other Examples

Besides the three examples described, there are many other approaches and ideas on how to secure the visitor's access to the museum. Many such as the **Theater Museum**<sup>4</sup> in Vienna have enlarged their online collection and can currently count about 60.000 objects to their **digital gallery**.

As the development of applications for digital devices is becoming cheaper and simpler, museums such as the **Museum of Art History** in Vienna has developed an App for art education **KHM Stories**<sup>5</sup> which provides the user with additional information about paintings and audio guides.

Besides the great variety of digital tools some museums such as the **Lentos Art Museum**<sup>6</sup> in Linz have taken a practical approach to staying in touch with its customer base. For the young museums' visitor, a free **Take Away Artist Box** provided children and their family with an artistic kit to create their own art at home.

On the part of the ICOM Austria the campaign "**re-open. Erlebnis Museums.**"<sup>7</sup> was created to promote the re-opening of museums in Austria and ensure visitors that security and hygiene measures are taken to help contain the COVID-19 Virus. Other Museums shared under the **#closedbutactive** which actions they take to ensure accessibility to the visitor or inform about the processes taking place within the museums while being closed.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theatermuseum.at/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.khm.at/erfahren/kunstvermittlung/app-khm-stories/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.lentos.at/html/de/106.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> <http://icom-oesterreich.at/news/re-open-erlebnis-museum>

## Summary

After a theoretical introduction into the role of the museums and their set goals for this paper, on the base of three examples, it will be analysed what digital content are provided to the online audience when there is no physical visit to the museums building possible. In the following part that digital offers are now critically positioned and analysed within the theoretical framework. Can all these activities be defined as Museum 2.0 and are the proposed objectives by the ICOM achieved?

### **Belvedere Digital**

The Belvedere has taken different approaches to provide the user with digital tools that can enrich the museums experience physically and from their homes. Regarding the equality and openness of the program, all parts of the digital Belvedere are accessible time-independent and free of charge. However, for people without internet access or users with disabilities in regard to hearing or reading, the equality aspect may suffer. The material presented on YouTube, for example, is in the German language and subtitles are automatically generated by the platform itself, which often result in inaccurate translations. Concerning the significant amount of international visitor each year in the museum this may pose a great problem. Nonetheless supporting tools or information about this issue were not noticeable on the Belvederes website. Concerning the participation and co-operation, the user invited to use the instruments provided, but a further step of responding to the users' action or invitation to discussing what has been experienced is missing on the website.

This brings the analysis to the question of Web 2.0. As described by Capriotti et al., the Belvedere forwards the user to its social media channels without further instruction what or to whom the user should share its impression. The #KunstpausefürZuhause, for example, has been used seven times this year and four times has it been the Belvedere itself using the hashtag. Regarding the Livestreams and Artistic Talks, the views range between 36 and 2906 (Status 22.12.20) on YouTube and subscriber 1980 on the main channel (Status 22.12.20). Users generally do not tend to comment on YouTube and are more likely to comment on the Instagram and Facebook page. A general culture of discussion cannot be observed in the comments on social media channels. Suggestions by the users or comments on the material are not responded to by the Belvedere.

Regarding the visitors-roles, it can therefore be said that there is a first approach to enabling a communicator-visitor role. With the museum's lack of response, the user's action, however, is

not acknowledged, which could result in fewer reactions by users in the future. The other two roles of the curator- and artist-visitor cannot be observed by the possibilities and user's behaviour on the Digital Belvedere Platform.

### **Experiments at home**

As in the case of the Belvedere, the access of the program by the technical museum is accessible to everyone with internet access and does not include any costs to use. The project Experimente für Zuhause generally aims for young children and their parents. For those, the experiments are surely educative, studiedly, and enjoyable, but there is still room for improvement in the regard of participation and co-operation. Merely inviting the user to contribute their experiments or research question to share with a community or to award successful experiments with credit points to promote sustained engagement could be a possible example of a more visitor focused approach.

The lack of interactivity, in this case, is also represented to a certain degree on social media channels. Under #TechnikKinderleicht only 15 posts on Instagram (Status 22.12.20) can be found and under #TechnischesMuseumWien over 1000 posts are listed (Status 22.12.20), which cannot all be linked to the bespoke project. Facebook Post under this hashtag are mostly only liked and not commented on by the users.

Compared to the Belvedere, the technical museum stronger encourages the users to share under a specific hashtag their own experiments. If the user does so, a museum should respond to this action. With the few posts on the platform Instagram, the museum does "like" the content; an online conversation is not happening to a greater extent.

The base for a Museum 2.0 is certainly laid by the technical museum. With promoting a stronger communicator-visitor and artist-visitor by "reposting and commenting" on the user experiments, a continuous engagement of user could be promoted, which may further lead to them visiting the museums again, when it will be able to re-open.

## **MAK Lap App**

In order to Access the MAK Lap app, no download from any AppStore is needed as the "App" can simply be used through the website link. The handling and design are futuristic, and through a code, scheme user can directly navigate through the digital content. The Navigation, however, is not simple, and a better overview is better given when using the website on a bigger screen. Especially for user groups that do not adapt to new and uncommon interfaces that easily may struggle with using the application.

This project is generally accessible to all internet users as the other two examples given before, the content both available in German and the English language. The MAK states that the app shall be a "provide incentives to extend and intensify contact and co-operation with such educational institutions... invitation to get involved in research and interaction is intended not only to provide orientation but also to stimulate participation and both active and discursive engagement..." (MAK, 2020) As a "normal" individual user the participation besides using the app and co-operating with the MAK concerning the app is not strongly favoured.

Concerning the degree of interactivity, the possibility of creating a personal collection and playing the games on the website generates a response to the action of the user. Especially the collection tool enables the user to take on the early discussed curator-visitor role, and he is also shown where to find the piece in the actual exhibition space. The critical aspect hereby is, nevertheless, the limited options to share the personal collection. Simply the website link to the collection piece is copied, and the user can only share it within its own social media presence. A response or discussion with the museums itself or other MAK users is limited to non-existent.

As the discussion about future changes and development, for example, climate change is a primary aim of this project, a greater level of interactivity for the users would be favourable. The app supplies additional information and lets the user actively navigate through the content, play games and technologically interact with the MAK. An exchange of the user's thought or comments on the presented topics or question that might arise, do not find any place to be shared or listened to. This is certainly a field of action where the MAK could further develop its MAK Lap App towards a Web 2.0 tool.

## **General View**

The three presented examples have all tried to go beyond a simple website that solely equips the visitor with information about the museum's history or ticket prices or opinion hours. Moving away from Web 1.0, they created channels on prominent social media platforms, where they share information with their followers regularly.

Regarding the ICOM goals that this paper has chosen to see as the ultimate goals of a museum to fulfil its role towards society and other interest groups, not all goals are achieved. The characteristics of being educative, studiedly, and enjoyable are instead subject to a personal assessment. A positive aspect is that the given examples are free and for many users are completely accessible. In regard to users with disabilities, all example could enhance their offers. The aspect of participation and co-operation, which can be linked to the support of the three visitor roles also is a field that requires improvement.

The extent to which a user or online visitor can contribute to the museum's work or share his impression of it with others is simply not there. The user is often presented a digital exhibition that he is invited to visit and look at. To let the visitor, evaluate the art, acknowledge his opinion, or let the visitor become an artist himself is still an untouched field by the museums analysed in this paper. If there is the possibility to comment for the user, it is a one-way communication most times. Another interesting observation of this paper is the great number of offers for especially a younger target group and the focus on families at home. So that the museum provides them with material and activities, as the problems and needs of families seem to be evident to the institution and it is simple to provide a solution.

## Conclusion

The ICOM, the international council of Museums, has noticed that the definition from the year 2007, although only 13 years old, is not accurate enough to describe the museum's role. The society is continuously developing, and through great influences such as digitalisation, existing structures and processes need to be redefined. On great change within the museums, the sector has happened within the relationship between the museum and its visitors. Through constantly growing new digital tools, the visitors demand not only entertainment or education by the museum but also to actively take part and co-operate, as well as interacting with the institution and others.

Being online is not simply enough anymore as the Web changes from 1.0 to Web 2.0. Also, Museums need to adapt to the new needs and demands by the digital visitor. With the change to a more visitor-focused approach on the museum experience museums now have sought to ensure the access for their audience through their website, application for mobile devices and a more extended and greater social media presence.

As the three examples of the Belvedere, the technical museum, and the museums for Applied Arts in Vienna have shown that museums' ideas and approaches are very diverse but partly share the same components. Concerning the set objectives by the ICOM, the differentiation of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 as well as the different types of visitor roles the analysis. although enabling the user to digital access, museums are yet not entirely or even to a significant part taking advantage of the potential the digital world could offer.

Especially through the COVID-19 pandemic the importance of a strong and target group-friendly social presence may be a crucial success factor for post-pandemic times. This digital presence is not only a survival strategy of the course of the COVID-19 pandemic but will have growing importance throughout the upcoming years and decades. Besides the danger of a virus, there are various other challenges and barriers for visitors worldwide to access museums such as in Austria or elsewhere. Digital tools such as those presented in this paper can enhance the visitor experience within the museum and guarantee equal and open access to those who cannot visit the museums physically.

## Statutory Declaration

I herewith declare that I have composed the present research paper myself and without use of any other than the cited sources and aids. Sentences or parts of sentences quoted literally are marked as such; other references regarding the statement and scope are indicated by full details of the publications concerned. The research paper in the same or similar form has not been submitted to any examination body and has not been published.

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