

Chapter 1

Researching & Photographing Cities: Getting Started

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This chapter raises preliminary issues and questions intended for those undertaking urban investigation through the camera lens. It issues an invitation to think critically about what a photograph is and how photography might be deployed in critical urban research and commentary. Entire cities are un-researchable. Yet 'slicing' them for investigation raises issues of partiality, limitation and applicability to the bigger issues of our time. Staring into a crack in the ground might entertain you but how useful is it really in understanding how the social world actually works?

Thinking about photography

Before embarking on photographic exploration of urban landscapes it is vital to put some thought into what is actually a photograph. I will suggest some frameworks for thinking about photography and will preface this by saying something about seeing and photography and the relationship between them.

We learn to negotiate urban landscape in scanning mode. We selectively take in jumbles of visual data in nanoseconds, on the hoof, while sifting it for (personal and social) significance. These are fleeting and fragile ways of seeing. More attentive ways, the kind that form the point of departure for urban investigation, take time and concentration. The camera focuses us as researchers and provides a technology for more disciplined observation. Seeing is a skilled social practice (Jenks, 1995). What we see and how to see it is bound up with how we learn to be social beings, and with the ways in which the social world is organised. In other words seeing is bound up with who we are and how our world operates. Seeing does not connect us to some outside realm; it is an integral part of the bigger social matrix in which we operate. So seeing in the context of urban research is part of a delicate balancing act. We are part of the social conventions of seeing in a particular (conventional) way *and* we can also search for new ways of seeing, ways that challenge and re-arrange social conventions. This is the creative bind in which urban researchers operate.

Now let us move from seeing to knowing. How we know about things through seeing them is not immediately obvious. There is no clear map that takes us from one to the other and both are selectively focussed activities. As John Berger (1977) reminds us, the relationship between what we *see* and what we *know* is never settled. This is something for to think about in the context of practice and specific projects. Permutations in the connection between seeing and knowledge form the second creative bind in urban photographic investigation and analysis.

Take a third step from the seeing-and-knowing bind to photography. Seeing and photography are evidently interconnected activities in that they lean on each other but they are not the same. Seeing delivers multiple vantage-points on the city and its lives, so the question becomes what to select with the lens. Selection is an aesthetic-intellectual decision. Visual sociologist Douglas Harper (personal communication) tells his students that a photograph is composed through light and ideas. Ideas come from observation and reading: encounters between what is seen in deeper observation and new and imaginative ways of thinking about them. Photography is an intellectual, an aesthetic and an imaginative practice. It involves aesthetic judgement about what makes a convincing and appealing image but it also requires intellectual work and the capacity to image urban life in ways that transcend what we already know.

Photography is a materialised manipulation of the equally manipulated cognitive processes involved in seeing. Photographs are arrested 'moments' of seeing captured through technical decisions about framing, lighting, aperture, film speed, lens angle. Photographers have the ability to make traces of objects, people, places and circumstances into images; a creative activity requiring the same kinds of conceptualisation as the written texts composing urban theory. Photographs are composed through all of these decisions – which people, objects, places, events or circumstances to aim the lens at, and how? When you take a photograph you have already made these and more decisions besides. You have already theorised your object, you have arranged it and told a story about it, whether you are aware of it or not.

Photography in urban research/analytical contexts involves dialogues with what John Tagg (1988,p.6,p.61) drawing on Foucault calls 'regimes of truth'. Despite being a 'species of alchemy', photographs are prized for their accounting of reality (Sontag, 2003, p. 72); they are evidence that something has happened – a trace passed before the lens – *and* they are staged (Sontag, 2003). Photographs are art, spectacle and documentary. They are both 'real' - in that a trace passed before the lens, something happened, something was there and the lens caught it - and they are contrived or staged. Decisions have been made about what to capture and how to do it. It is precisely this combination of artifice and 'reality' that makes photographs interesting, this interface at which we work in visual apprehensions of urban life. The same combination of artifice and 'reality' also characterises urban theory.

In 'Regarding the Pain of Others', Susan Sontag (2003) used 1st World War photography to illustrate this point about reality and artifice. She suggests that war photographers often dragged dead soldiers to more picturesque landscapes in order to photograph them. This is an intertwining of artifice and reality: war is real, the soldier is dead but the photograph is staged. It's a real fake. Urban photography is a staged reckoning with realities, by which I mean that photographers play with the material that is 'out there'. It is these realities out there, the material that urban life furnishes, that we can't fake, that keep us honest in weaving of our social commentaries, our stories about urban life. Of course we *can* fake them now more easily than ever using digital photo manipulation applications. But erasure

of inconvenient truths in order to shape a particular story requires reflexive awareness; the producer knows what has been erased. Other, non-visual, forms of urban research data share precisely these characteristics arising from their selective collection and omission of inconvenient truths.

It would be absurd to make simple realist claims for photography, to suggest that photographs reveal 'the truth'; they inevitably dialogue with staged 'truths'. Their validity as evidence that something has happened, in which they are routinely used by the police and in court, is as flawed as all other methods for knowing and investigating the social world. Freeman (1993) suggests that the most important issue regarding validity in qualitative research is plausibility. Is this picture, this account of a life-world, this rendering of the city, plausible? Is it reasonable and believable – if indeed we want it to be reasonable and believable rather than provocative - given what else we know? Does it sustain the case we are trying to make with it or not? Does it work to *counter* the legitimacy of what we know by other means and thus contribute a sceptical glance, a question mark, over the operation of urban worlds? This is equally valid work. All evidence is flawed. It is limited by the techniques through which it is collected, and photographs are much more than evidence, even when they are deployed in straightforward evidentiary frameworks.

I have suggested some ways of conceptualising photography in urban investigation and analysis. Whatever the manner in which researchers conceptualise photography, it is still important to consider the boundaries on what it is and to deliberately consider how it can be used to build a set of visual-textual arguments.

What Work do Photographs do?

What can photographs do? Answering this question involves thinking about how photography might be used in the *practice* of urban research, commentary and analysis. Perhaps the most valuable property of photography is that it works in a register that is beyond words. Photographs transcend and extend verbal and written articulation and don't need to be reduced to words. Photographs capture a sensuous world of social action, aesthetics, kinaesthetics and live performances, as well as action as it unfolds in social contexts (Thrift and Dewsbury 2000). I am not claiming that only photography does these things, but that it does them particularly effectively, more effectively than other ways of investigating familiar and unfamiliar urban worlds (ethnography). Photographs issue an invitation to the viewer to imagine the scenes of the research and place themselves within the frame. In the following pages I unpack some of these properties and say something of their usefulness in urban research, commentary and analysis.

I began using photography in my own research practice out of a sense of desperation. I was investigating the circuits, circulations and lifeworlds of homeless and marginally housed 'schizophrenics' living in the 'community care' system in Montreal (Knowles, 2000). In the context of state welfare retrenchment this meant they were left to insert themselves into the city in any way they could. I had been funded by the Quebec Provincial Government to

investigate something (community mental health care) that didn't exist except in the most minimal form.

At first I approached them with a microphone, but it soon became apparent that their verbal narratives – what they could, or were willing to, say about themselves and their lives - were very thin. Translating any life into spoken narrative demands huge skills in translation. Translating troubled lives makes excessive demands on informants, something I only began to appreciate after visiting an exhibition of artwork created by people with schizophrenia. Their vivid and complex images suggested so much richer lives than their verbally narrated stories. In contrast to their slender spoken narratives the contexts in which they operated and the way they looked, were visually stunning. They were full of information and evoked rich atmospheres. Therefore I speculated that photography stood a better chance of capturing narratives than my microphone. The schizophrenics I was studying had other ways of telling stories - to the lens. I found a photography student – Ludovic Dabert - at the university where I taught and convinced him to join my research team. Ludovic Dabert used his camera to try and untangle their relationship with the city and with each other.

Many urban sociologists, anthropologists and geographers take their own photographs. I take photographs too, some of which are useable in presentations and publications and some of which are not. My own photographs work best for me as field site inventory: I use them as a form of note-taking from which I later write. They are especially useful when I am trying to access unfamiliar urban lives from objects of material culture. Compared to those taken by the photographers with whom I work, they don't capture atmosphere or the feel of things very well. They are technically competent but often over-lit or not taken from the most interesting angle. My visual literacy is limited; I specialise in writing.

Because of this I prefer to work in collaboration with those who think visually and who thus have a well-developed visual literacy that parallels my own skills as a researcher and writer. The photographs from my projects are therefore better – technically and aesthetically - and more useful analytically than any I could have taken. Working with photographers generates a synergy in which each of us bounces-off the other's skill, expertise and investigative energy to develop and extend our own. In place of visual literacy I bring years of reading social theory and skill in biographical and mapping research techniques. Some photographers like this energy as much as I like theirs. This arrangement has the additional benefit of a research division of labour: it is difficult to collect verbal and visual data simultaneously, and two (different) approaches to the research are inevitably richer than one.

Building Critical Commentaries

Photographers *work* to build critical commentaries and alternative analyses. They work against the grain of conventional wisdom as well as sustain it: photography is entirely promiscuous. Photographs have embedded selections and arrangements of people, objects

and contexts, things to tell and not to tell. For example African American photographer Thomas E Askew who collaborated with the famous sociologist Du Bois made a powerful case for the descriptive but critical power of photography in their 'American Negro' exhibition at the 1900 Paris Exhibition (Smith, 2004). Using commentary, photographs and statistics, they repositioned Southern American Negroes, transporting them from a landscape of rural poverty to more central and prosperous social locations. In Askew's photographs, bourgeois African Americans sit at a desk, or in a dining room. Simple description re-theorizes, repositions, and delivers as critique that chews away at political context: at what it meant to be black at that time, offering alternative versions of race in a grammar of images (Smith 2004, Massey 1999, Knowles 2006).

What Lies Beneath?

Photographs – always a microcosm unless taken from a great height - invite a probing of depth. They challenge us to think about the forces that lay beneath the image exerting a controlling influence on it. What lies beneath the surface on which the image rests? What combination of systems and circumstances produce this and not some other image? What must be the case at a larger scale of events and systems for this photograph to be possible? This too suggests a critical, analytical framing that goes beyond what we see. But most significantly it invites us to speculate on the macro-circumstances of the micro in the spirit of C. Wright Mills (1959): private troubles and public issues. Not only do photographs demand a positioning of the micro within larger social frames, they simultaneously invite speculation about the *connections* between the micro and the macro. This is where photography is at its most analytically powerful in urban investigation. A photograph can peer at a tiny speck in the city and position it within larger social questions and debates about regeneration, gentrification and the operation of financial capital in making urban landscape (Smith 2004, Knowles 2011, Knowles and Harper 2009, Harper 2001, Harper 1987, Harper 1982, Knowles and Sweetman 2004).

Seepage

Photographs reveal surface and seepage. They challenge our attempts to exclude, manipulate and theorize because an image's surface contains clues which we may find inconvenient. This takes us back to my earlier comments about staged reckoning with 'truths'. In *Photography's Other Histories* Chris Pinney (2003) writes about photography's collision with politics and life by which he means the camera lens includes everything visible, foiling attempts to select. With photography's seepage we can never be fully in control of the resulting photograph; consequently we must deal with what is 'out there' We can't entirely filter out the random information contained in photographs, so we are forced into some kind of a reckoning with it and this keeps us honest as researchers.

Social Context

Photographs log the material contexts in which people live. Inventory is a classic tool in anthropological ethnography (Collier and Collier, 1986). What objects articulate a life? How are they arranged and what does this assemblage look like? How do people interact with

their material environment? Photos not only reveal the aesthetics of places but can be returned to again and again, mined for further information as our understanding expands and new things come into the frame which we didn't previously think significant.

Environmental portraiture (Harper 2001, 1987, 1982; Suchar, 2004) captures people in the cultural, social and economic contexts they both create for themselves and which reveal broader structural constraints in which they operate. There are examples of powerful uses of this by Charles Suchar (2004) who captures macro-characteristics of gentrification in Amsterdam and Chicago; and by Ana Maria Mauad and Alicia Rouverol (2004) who detail the working life of a poultry factory worker through Cedric Chatterley's photographs. In environmental portraiture, photographs capture the relationships between people, the ways in which they interact with each other, their posture, comportment, conviviality and hostility. How close or distant are they? How frequently do they interact? What is the character of their social interaction? Environmental portraiture captures moments, glances, postures, clues about relationships, things that are written across the face and on the surfaces of the body and its performances. Douglas Harper and I used it to investigate the ways in which British migrants in Hong Kong "do" migration (Knowles and Harper, 2009).

The Unspoken

Harper's photographs reveal the built landscape of Hong Kong and the stories told by inscriptions of culture-in-transition from empire to globalization on its surface (Knowles and Harper 2009). They expose the relationships people form with their everyday landscapes. This was particularly useful in this project because we needed to figure out the relationships that British migrants formed with the city. Their *talk* revealed an expansive and comfortable relationship with their landscape of new settlement. Their activities and journeys around and beyond the city - which Harper photographed - told another story. This alternative story told of restricted geographies, centred on other expatriates and activities familiar in Britain. Where people go and how they go contain important clues, and documenting this leans on mapping as much as photography. Bodily movements reveal ways of walking, and ingrained habits, which tell stories about who an informant is, and how they interact with the world. In this case, bodily movement revealed the migrants' habitual scenes of everyday life and their threading together of specific places in Hong Kong. These in turn told bigger stories about their relationships to this place, about how they *lived* as migrants. These stories, told in movement rather than words, are unspoken performances by bodies, flesh monuments, revealing unfolding social action in context (Leigh Foster, 1996; Thrift and Dewsbury, 2000).

There are two significant registers of the unspoken. The first is unspoken because it is routine, ordinary and ingrained so that no one thinks to articulate it. These are the over-familiar verities underpinning our lives, the frameworks we are not aware of and don't articulate. The second is the unspeakable. These are the things which cannot be articulated because they operate only in the register of action and feeling, not words (Kristeva 1982). Photographs often augment or contradict verbally produced narratives and, where

speaking is not possible, they provide a silent narrative. Stories are told in people's movements and in the things they wear and do, offered to the camera lens, not to the microphone. Les Back's (2007) essay on tattoos 'Inscriptions of Love' is one of the most powerful accounts of imagery's silent articulations. As Back tells the story the imagery of the tattoo articulates the life which a dying sailor is unable to verbalise, which he was always unable to verbalise even before he was dying, because not everyone has this capacity or the confidence it requires.

The schizophrenic persons I interviewed in Montreal 'talked' a relationship with the city in their verbal narratives but this was challenged when we walked with and photographed them. The lives they talked and the lives they walked were quite different and provided contradictory information about their relationship with the city and in the process showed how ambiguous and contradictory such relationships are. In their movements their accounts of participation turned to a visceral marginalisation; their relationships with public space were easily dislodged. Yes, they spent time in the mall, but on the stairway in fear of ejection by private security guards. They used the mall because there was no other inside 'public' (private) space in which they could be in cold weather. The homeless shelters threw them out during the day. They walked a different story than they talked and if we had listened rather than looked and photographed, we would not have understood this. I'm not claiming that observation and photography are better, more real, or rigorous, but these techniques tell different stories thus adding to what we know by other means. Photography captures what people *do* as well as what they say and often reveals the tensions between these dimensions – between saying and doing – throwing an analytical spotlight on action and practice.

Micro and Macro-worlds

Photographs, like the ethnographic practices in which they are often rendered, are detailed and deep, and this depth is traded against the superficialities of big samples and broader applicability. Like ethnography generally, photographs capture the specific and the particular, tableaux frozen in time and place. But do they only do this? I contend that photographs capture particular moments in the unfolding of action from which we can work the general in the particular in the spirit of C. Wright Mills (1959).

There are a number of ways of thinking about this. I use environmental portrait photographs in a particular way in the course of my collaboration with photographers, such that I seek to situate people in the city and in their relationships with others. I combine these photographs with mobile biographical interviews in which I go about their daily routines with them exploring their lives in depth and in their specificity. Interviewing that is embedded in the processes of everyday life rather than separated from it by being stationary in a room with a microphone yields rich and detailed information. The result is that these characters are offered as biographically unique subjects who nevertheless share characteristics, as, with others, for instance as migrants or as homeless persons. Howard Becker (2002) Thrift, reviewing Berger and Mohr's *Seventh Man*, suggests another way he

calls 'specific generalisation'. Berger and Mohr (1975) put together multiple portraits of migrants without naming them or detailing their circumstances. This visual strategy formed part of an argument about the operation of capitalism and the use of migrant labour as an abstract category to which the photographer Jean Mohr gives faces and allow us to imagine lives.

Photographs offer forms of application beyond their frames and thus enable us to situate images in broader social landscapes and in other important investigative frames. The particular may have unique and random elements, but it is unlikely to be entirely unique or entirely random. The specific is often an instance of something bigger than itself and it is up to urban researchers to make that argument. Statistics and surveys are useful in drawing the bigger landscape of which the particular is a part. The case for this must be made.

Live Performances

Working visually involves a significant shift away from the often oddly lifeless and mechanical accounts of everyday life in textual representation (Thrift and Dewsbury, 2000), towards engagements that are contextual, kinaesthetic and sensual - that live. Visual work allows us to see the ongoing and embodied practice of everyday life, productions that are multi-dimensional and chaotic, skills and performances that cannot be reduced to words. Visual work embeds its subjects in context. It places the unfolding of action in space and time, in particular material and symbolic circumstances and emphasises action as the performative arrangement and re-arrangement of these resources (Thrift and Dewsbury 2000). Seeing with visual methods imposes the situatedness, the embeddedness of social life. The use of moving images takes this further, admitting the kinaesthetic more directly.

I have drawn together some of the things photography can *do* in investigation and analysis of urban life. There are many things I haven't covered, for example, taking photographs over time to show longitudinal shifts. Douglas Harper has photographed the same square in Bologna over 20 years (www.duq.edu/sociology/faculty_staff/harper). In that time his photographs show changes in social activities and uses of the square, changes in transport, in dress and more besides. Other sociologists working more quantitatively with photographic data code images around key themes. The photographer Manuel Vazquez photographs the same space repeatedly over a few days and then layers the images on top of each other taking out the background context to enhance the people and activity. The result is a hyper-real exposure of the space in which time is compressed to make a point about place. (www.manuelv.net)

Photographic methods are rarely used alone even in the context of a photographic exhibition. They are in practice combined with other methods; they can be combined with any other methods, all other methods, statistics, observation, mapping, interviews, large-scale surveys and focus groups. They can be used effectively in interviews as 'photo-elicitation' where the researchers' or the informants' photographs are used to deepen the

interview. How photographs and interviews are combined are very important issues beyond the scope of this chapter (Harper, 2005, Knowles and Harper, 2009)).

Writing with Images and Words

In urban research and analysis photographic images are combined with words, positioned around and with words. It follows that the ways in which words and images are combined is very important. Even photographers use words, if only minimally in captions and titles, fixing subjects, often places and dates too. In a logo-centric world images often occupy a subsidiary position as illustration, as evidence of 'the real' or as a souvenir that the researcher was there and did this or that. This is problematic, not least because photographs have a much greater capacity than illustration. Some of the weakest visual research uses the textual formulation: 'This is what we are doing and here is a picture of it'. Equally banal is the photograph followed by a lengthy literal word description of its visible contents. A variation of this uses the obscure lexicon of semiotics to intellectualise banality and ignoring the fact that photographs work in a register beyond words and need not be reduced to them. Photographs are most effectively used to extend the text in the register of mood, look and feel. They do different work. They can be used to support a narrative built in words or to undermine it, to suggest other ways of thinking.

Slicing Cities

I suggested earlier that whole cities are un-researchable. Cities are networked circuits and nodes: matrices of multiple mobilities rather than just places waiting to be characterised. They are dynamic living entities, mosaics of diverse lives that defy easy access and are notoriously difficult to 'capture' either with photography or any other investigative or analytical technique. It is important to think about cities more broadly as a tapestry of fabrics. There is the fabric of the built environment, the buildings and street patterns that betray some of the dominant interests and activities through which cities are composed. But there is also the rich human fabric, the tapestry of diverse lives in parallel and intersection sharing the same space. It is also important to consider time when thinking about the city. Sukhdev Sandu's (2007) book *Night Haunts* shows how London is a very different city animated by a different set of lives and purposes at night. What follows are some ways of slicing cities to make them more research-manageable.

1. Following the Trail

Following the trail is one way of slicing a city into manageable proportions. This can be the trail of a person, a small subsection or group of people or an object. Mapping the personal geographies of a person, using them as a guide, provides vital clues about how they live their version of the city. Selecting a person can be tricky and selection impacts on the data generated. This often begins from a category of people – young people, old people, homeless people, people who roughly hold in common a set of circumstances with the proviso that there are always wide biographical variations so that no one is purely a category. Questions then arise about how to choose people from such broad categories. These are often settled by geographical locations within the city. You might for example

know from previous research that a particularly interesting group, interesting in terms of the potential richness of the data they will yield, are found in particular areas. The choice is sometimes settled through personal access opportunities and happenstance. The key thing is to leave a warrantable trail of methodological decision making and the reasons why they were made. For example in one of my own projects referred to earlier we tracked the movements of homeless and marginalised schizophrenic persons to establish something of their relationship to Montreal. Where do people go? Which parts of the city do they use/not use? How expansively do they travel and how do they travel? On foot, by car, bus and so on?

2. Object Guides

Using an object as a guide is also effective and provides a route through a city. People circulate with objects and people's lives are entwined with objects making objects rich fields of urban enquiry. With photographer Michael Tan, I have been tracing the circuits of a pair of flip-flop sandals made in SE China (Knowles 2015). The sandal nicely sliced the city of Fuzhou, concentrating our investigations on the industrial villages to the South. Following its routes we found that the sandals moved in container trucks along ring roads and bridges to the port and was then distributed all over the world. We decided to follow the trail to Ethiopia, one of the biggest markets for Chinese plastics. Here the sandal passes through the territories of Somali pirates and the route divides between legal and illegal (smuggling) routes only to recombine on Addis markets. At this point we follow them onto the feet of an elderly woman and followed *her* routes through the city.

3. Events and Microcosms

A variation of this is to find a resting-point in a place rich in the things you are interested in and watch what passes by. Other strategies involve finding an event, an eruption, a concentrated burst of activity that grounds some of the things you want to investigate. Examples are a street market, a festival, or a performance. Another way of slicing cities is to find a set of practices to focus on such as funerals, dance, hairdressing, shopping or work. Successful student projects in the programmes I work on have included, among others, plotting funeral routes in East London and using money-transfer shops and barber shops to unravel migrant lives and activities. Microcosms like this serve as tiny capsules of urban life with bigger resonance. The important thing here is to situate them in those bigger issues and draw the connections between the micro and the macro effectively.

Sometimes it is possible to find a small part of a city that displays the bigger processes in which it is bound up. Investigating the city of Fuzhou in SE China, I found the point where a crumbling version of the old city abutted the new via a bridge called 'Liberation'. This provided the opportunity to explore the theme of social change through building and architecture, as well as the transformation of a post-socialist state that used the lexicon of liberation to name its bridges. As I suggested earlier, the particular provides the opportunity for a more broad-ranging discussion of what makes the city in macro terms.

Conclusions

Cities pose an exciting challenge for researchers. They are where most people will live in the next few years and this makes them important laboratories for investigation and critical commentary. The most phenomenal growth in urbanism and the most improvised cities, where people innovate in creating the basics in daily survival are in the global South. In Jakarta, Johannesburg, Shanghai, Mumbai and Buenos Aires, urban citizens live transitory and improvised lives (Simone 2004). They live in ways that extend the provision of facilities by municipal authorities. There are great opportunities for urban researchers in these cities to understand how daily life is constituted and lived in precarious and resourceful ways. There are new opportunities to understand the networks into which cities are drawn by the traffic constituting globalisation and the new forms of social inequality generated. The challenge for urban researchers is not just slicing cities to make them researchable, but understanding the myriad forms of social life they sustain and, sometimes, conceal. Photography is proving itself an invaluable tool in urban investigation and analysis as well as in campaigning arenas for global social justice. But there is scope to work in still more imaginative ways in bringing what is not seen before the public gaze in new and exciting grammars of images (Smith 2004, Massey 1999) that wrestle with the complexity of the global cities of today. Over to you!

This chapter invited you to think about what photography is and some of the things it can do in the context of urban research and analysis. Photography's potential is far greater than the ways in which it is ordinary deployed in developing description and illustration of urban theory. I have suggested that the camera is an instrument for theoretical work in some of the questions photographs pose. I have also suggested some short-cuts to accessing cities, making them into bite-sized researchable projects. Cities are fascinating places to do geography, sociology and anthropology). Pursuing urban research, commentary and analysis through the lens adds new and exciting dimensions to what can be done by more logo-centric means.

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