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## Urban river narratives as mediators of urban practices and normative interactions\*

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**Abstract.** This article considers the role of urban legends and narratives centered on rivers in shaping urban practices, social interactions and normative regimes. Moving beyond the conventional view of the river as either an economic resource or a symbol, the authors conceptualize it as a complex mediator, whose agency is enacted through narratives that circulate within the urban fabric. Legends concerning the river — its founding, floods, submerged sacred sites, mythical inhabitants — are not inert folklore but active participants within networks of urban communications, narratives that materially manifest in spatial planning, daily rituals of citizens, and legislative constraints. The theoretical framework synthesizes perspectives from urban anthropology, media theory (in particular the concept of “media as environments”), and sociology of interaction. Based on cases from Russian cities (Saint Petersburg, Voronezh, Ulan-Ude, Perm, Yekaterinburg), the authors identify channels — official cultural discourse, social media, touristic guides, oral histories, through which urban river legends develop and affect urban processes — from protests against waterfront to the formulation of environmental norms and codes for the public space design. Thus, the competition between river narratives — “living history” versus “engineering object”, “sacred source” versus “threat” — lies at the heart of many contemporary urban conflicts. The capacity of municipal authorities and professional communities to interact with river narratives rather than disregard them becomes a critical factor in managing urban development and ensuring public consensus.

**Key words:** urban river; urban studies; urban legends; mediation; narrative; urban practices; normative interactions; social interactions; collective memory; symbolic geography

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Over the past two decades, Russian urban scholars have showed a growing interest in the role of symbolic and cultural factors in the organization of urban space and social life [2; 15; 16; 17]. While such aspects as memory of place, urban folklore and local identity have successfully entered the research field [13], their connection to material practices and normative regimes often remains more declarative than demonstrative. The article focuses on one of the key natural-symbolic elements of the city — the river — not as a static object but as a dynamic narrative environment.

Classical approaches consider the river either as an economic resource, determining the logic of settlement and industrial development, or as a component of urban branding and recreation, supplemented by considerations of real estate economics [1; 9]. We offer a different perspective — the river as a repository and generator of urban legends, which, in turn, act as powerful mediators shaping the city self-consciousness and its practical enactment (the term from science and technology studies). Thus, the central question is whether river narratives and legends, circulating through diverse media ecologies, affect urban practices, models of social interaction, and formal regulatory documents? The relevance of this question is determined by the intensification of conflicts over embankment spaces in Russian cities (from Saint Petersburg to Khabarovsk), when the interests of developers, municipal authorities, activists, and ordinary citizens clash. These conflicts are hardly reducible to economy or ecology; therefore, traditional urbanistic approaches seem insufficient [4; 5]. Their core is frequently constituted by competing narratives about the place and meaning of the river in city life, which is why methodology for studying conflicts [18] should be supplemented by “river semantics”. Understanding the operational logic of such narratives is a prerequisite for developing management strategies that would account for both functional and meaningful dimensions of the urban environment.

### **River as a narrative environment, mediator and actant**

We suggest a synthesis of three complementary theoretical perspectives for interpreting the river not as a passive element of landscape but as an active participant in urban social life.

*Sociology of practice and concept of enactment.* Our key starting point is the turn to practice in social sciences [12]. This approach, developed in the works of Schatzki [11] and Reckwitz [10], considers social order not as a structure imposed from above or as a result of individual intentions but as the perpetually reproduced fabric of interconnected practices. Practice is a stabilized routine way of doing something (bodily actions, artefacts used, mental schemas, emotions, and knowledge of how things should be done). For instance, an evening dog walk along the embankment is a practice consisting of a route, a leash, dog’s habits, a sense of safety/danger, knowledge of when the lights are on, etc. In this logic, the city is enacted daily through myriads of such practices: commuting to work, buying

coffee, chatting on a bench, protesting against construction. The city is not a static background but a process and result of practices; thereby, to understand the city is to understand its practical order — how practices intersect to form recognizable patterns of urban life.

The river is incorporated into this order — it is not merely a geographical object but a constituent element of many practices: fishing, boat rides, jogging along, admiring a sunset, even avoiding a certain bank as unsafe. Crucially, the river enters such practices not as a neutral physical background but as endowed with meanings that prescribe how to interact with it. These meanings are the product of narratives and legends. Thus, the river becomes an actant (In the sense of Latour’s actor-network theory) — a non-human entity that, by virtue of ascribed properties (sanctity, danger, historicity), influences social networks, laws, and stories.

*Sociology of narrative and urban legends as a cultural means.* Studies of urban narrative landscapes [19; 20] and folklore are helpful, since people think and communicate through stories [8]. Narrative is not simply a tale about the past but a basic cognitive and cultural schema that organizes experience and cause-and-effect relationships, creates heroes, villains and morals. The city, complex and opaque, is particularly in need of narratives for its intelligibility. Unlike official history, urban legend is a living, circulating, anonymous or pseudo-authentic story perceived by community as plausible, although often with fantastic or sensational elements [21]. Its function is not to inform but to explain, warn, mark boundaries of the permissible and shape collective emotions (fear, nostalgia, pride) [22–24].

There are several archetypal plots. *The foundation myth*: the river as a cause and birthplace of the city, source of its strength and identity. An example of the myth of formation and shaping of urban historical identity is the city of Glazov in the Udmurt Republic, whose first mentions date back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Glazov received city status in 1780 by the decree of Catherine II. Glazov as “God’s eye” was the concept of Saint Petersburg architect Ivan Lem, who suggested the radiating scheme of streets to and from the square with the Transfiguration Cathedral (built in 1786) on the steep bank of the Cheptsya River. The cathedral was the pupil, the streets — eyelashes. To this day, this radial layout is preserved, despite the city having been “blinded” (the Cathedral was blown up in the 1960s); now the city “sees” again — the cathedral was restored. The Cheptsya River, a left tributary of the Vyatka River in the Volga basin, in the 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries was part of the Vyatka trade route connecting Russia with Siberia. Until the railway was built in 1897–1898, the Cheptsya remained navigable (timber was brought from Glazov for the Slobodskaya and Vyatka match factories. According to one explanation, the word is of Turkic origin, derived from the word “tepe” — “river between hills” — or from Udmurt “chupchi” — “winding water”. However, the version that inscribed small Glazov into the grand history of the country, empire, was in demand. The urban legend that the Cheptsya River got its name when Catherine

II, passing by, dropped her bonnet (chepets) into the water is reproduced by the city's inhabitants more often than other versions.

*The traumatic narrative:* the river as a source of danger (floods, drownings) or as an object of trauma (pollution, death of the river). Thus, townspeople living along dangerous rivers are familiar with the word *ordinär* (from Latin “corresponding to ordinary rules, usual, proper, normal”) — the average long-term water level. Saint Petersburg suffered from floods from its foundation in 1703. In the letters of Peter the Great to Alexander Menshikov (1708), there are mentions of the first river incidents, when the water rose meters above the *ordinär*. Alexander Pushkin described the flood on the Neva on November 19, 1824 in *The Bronze Horseman* (1833). On that day, the maximum rise of water reached 421 cm above the *ordinär*. Thus, the Neva is an angered river with will of its own: enraged, furious, malignantly seething — epithets conveying an atmosphere of destruction. The noise of water, collapsing buildings, people's cries — all this resembled a battlefield: “everything is heaped, swept and borne away”, “bodies lie around” as on a field after a battle.

*The narrative of the hidden/mysterious:* sunken churches, treasures, underground passages, mythical inhabitants (water spirits, monsters) — the river as a vertical, sacred or irrational space opposed to the horizontal rationality of streets. Myths and stories are preserved/produced by every major riverside settlement. In Yekaterinburg, there is a legend of underground passages to the Iset River from the Rastorguev-Kharitonov estate, the construction of which began in 1794 together with the Ascension Church and was completed in 1824. The city takes pride in the estate: the original project author was Tommaso Adamini, who arrived in Russia in 1796 and worked under the guidance of Giacomo Quarenghi. To this day, the house has two underground floors and a network of underground passages in different directions. The total area of its dungeons is about a thousand square meters. Another secret connected with flooded cellars is the legend of the Nevyansk (Leaning) Tower built at an angle in 1722–1732; in its cellars, silver coins were minted (Demidov's Mint). According to the legend, during an inspection by auditors from the tsar's court, the sluice gates of the dam were hastily opened and the cellars were flooded with the people inside.

*The nostalgic narrative* about the previously clean/wide river, which creates a benchmark for criticizing the present. Thus, the song “The Volga River Flows”, which was written in 1962 for the movie “The Volga Flows” and became popular much later in the performance of Lyudmila Zykina, turned into a personification of the river as a mother. Such an auditory mechanism of soulful personification, transforming the river from a symbol of national landscape into a source of heartfelt narratives, is precisely what made Zykina's performance a nostalgia model. Special regimes of nostalgia also include the connection between the river and labor. Thus, the factory dam in Yekaterinburg became the beginning of its construction by providing mechanical energy for mechanisms of the newly

founded Yekaterinburg Plant. The dam played a key role in creating the plant, ensuring a stable water supply for metallurgical processes, and the fact that townspeople affectionately call it Plotinka proves the emotional attachment to the river space. The Kama River is the main force for the cities of Perm and Sarapul. The Komi-Permyak legend about the origin of the Kama says that once it rained all summer, and there was not a single sunny day — all rivers overflowed, their banks collapsed. Only Kama the Bogatyr (a mythological hero) could move across the flooded area, he discovered that the flow of rivers was blocked by a mountain. The bogatyr lassoed a huge stone, dragged it, plowing ground, and made a new channel for water — the mighty Kama, named after the bogatyr, appeared. Thus, in the image of Kama, nostalgic, labor, heroic and catastrophic narratives merged, creating a narrative complex for cities on the Kama.

The described narratives compete, merge and differentiate, forming the narrative complex of the river in the perception of townspeople. This complex is the symbolic filter through which the river is perceived and which directs practices of interaction with it.

### **Media theory: Legends as media, city as media environment**

Following McLuhan [7] and more contemporary theorists (like Drucker [3; 6]), we consider media as any technologies, artefacts or environments that shape, store and convey human experience, altering the scale, rhythm and patterns of social life. In this logic, the urban legend is a medium for the relationship between a person and the river, conveying a certain image, emotion, behavior pattern and determining urban topology; just as in the science city practical involvement in scientific production replaced urban legends and determined the use of the city and narratives, making nuclear synthesis act as a universal medium [25–27]. The legend of the water spirit at the old mill mediates the perception of that place as dangerous, which, in turn, influences the practice of visiting it. A building can act as a medium — an industrial building (a power plant on the river) or a residential one (connected with the port, like the Stevedore's House in Perm) or a complex of buildings (the Zarechensky district in many cities or a satellite city across the river, concentrating urban social imaginary — Sormovo and Bor for Nizhny Novgorod, Tolyatti for Samara, Engels for Saratov, Bataysk for Rostov-on-Don). In the case of weak development of the river area, when it represents scattered industrial and residential complexes, this is compensated symbolically, like the famous “Happiness is Just Beyond the Mountains” on the embankment in Perm or the line of the old city above the Klyazma in Vladimir.

It is critically important to identify those channels through which media narratives about the river circulate and transform, as each channel has its own logic and audience: official-ideological media — monuments, museums, memorial plaques, school textbooks, city festivals; artistic media — literature, painting, cinema, music; digital and social media — crowdsourced maps, social network

communities, blogs, neighborhood chats; bodily-oral and spatial media — stories of old-timers, family lore, parental warnings, bodily memories of the river (smell, sound, temperature) and the material form of the embankment (ceremonial granite, overgrown wild slope).

The synthesis of all three perspectives provides the following analytical model: narratives (legends), born from the experience of interaction with the river and cultural tradition, circulate through various media channels; these mediated narratives form a symbolic image of the river (meanings and agency in the collective consciousness); this symbolic image acts as a script (scenario) that directs, encourages or prohibits certain practices; the totality of such practices, their repetition and connection ultimately enact the city in its specific form, including spatial organization, rhythms of life and models of social interaction; sustainable institutionalized practices and conflicts around them produce normative regimes (laws, zoning codes, rules of use) and new narratives, thus closing the cycle. The river is not an object but a process — a continuous flow of material and symbolic interactions, in which urban legends act as key mediators, translating culture into action and action into spatial and social order.

### **River in action: Narratives shaping space, practice and conflict**

*Saint Petersburg: canonized imperial river and trauma of floods.* In Saint Petersburg, the Neva is the most canonical and potent urban symbol. The dominant narrative, persistently reproduced in the school curriculum, museum exhibitions and official tourist discourse, is the imperial subjugation of the elements: the river as a sovereign flow, tamed by the genius of Peter and inscribed into the strict geometric order of ceremonial embankments. This image is materialized in the very granite of the Neva's banks, in the sweep of squares, in the prohibition of inappropriate private or high-rise development violating the panorama protected as cultural heritage. Urban planning codes literally freeze a poetic canon, turning Pushkin's lines into legal norms. However, there is a powerful and stable counter-narrative of the river-as-threat embodied in legends of floods as vengeance or wrath of the elements. This traumatic plot is typical not only for historical chronicles but for family stories, warnings from residents to newcomers, ritualized practice of monitoring the data from the Hydrometeorological Centre during autumn storms. Its material embodiment — the giant flood protection complex — an engineering response to collective anxiety, a materialized myth of safety. Everyday practices of citizens are based on the intersection of two plots: ritual walks along the Palace Embankment are an initiation into the imperial myth, strict harmonious view, while knowledge of flood districts forms deeply personal maps of risk. Thus, any planning decision on the banks of the Neva — be it the construction of a new bridge or embankment —

inevitably undergoes a test of conformity to two basic legends: will it destroy the sacralized panorama and will it increase the threat. Protests against development are often not just a dispute about aesthetics but a defense of an established narrative order for citizens' identity.

*Voronezh: narrative of double loss and ambivalence.* Voronezh with its reservoir demonstrates a different but no less revealing pattern of interaction between narrative and practice. Here, the key narrative is one of dual loss and ambivalence. The first, official-heroic layer, is the legend of the river as the cradle of the Russian navy under Peter I. The second, deeply traumatic layer, is the narrative of the betrayed or destroyed river which in the 1970s was turned into a technogenic reservoir, which is perceived by old-timers as an act of violence against natural landscape and memory of place. The second narrative supported in local history communities on social media and in oral stories gives rise to a specific spatial self-awareness: the city lives by an “unreal” river, which materializes in the chaotic, often indecisive policy of embankment improvement: fragmented attempts to create a recreational zone and neglected sections that seem to have no clear status — a historical place or a park. Thus, daily practices are largely compensatory: mass, sometimes wild picnics and swims on the shores of the reservoir are not just leisure but an unconscious attempt to return to the river its lost sociality, to prove its aliveness despite its engineering origin. Conflict situations are often based on the “return” of the historical river — a costly and controversial re-naturalization project. Its discussions are mainly a battle of narratives: progressivist (we have an established and functioning infrastructure) vs melancholic (we must return authenticity, the lost connection with historical landscape). Managerial decisions balance between these poles, and the instability of space is a direct consequence of the unresolved narrative conflict.

*Ulan-Ude: river as mediator of global ecological and cultural agendas.* The case of Ulan-Ude is illustrative, since the Selenga River acts as a powerful mediator of not only local but also global ecological and cultural agendas. Here the narrative of sacred purity and source dominates, for the Selenga flows into the Lake Baikal — a UNESCO World Heritage site and a central symbol of ecological consciousness in Russia. This legend, rooted both in the Buryat cultural tradition (veneration of water sources) and in the discourse of federal eco-activists, endows the river with a status of almost transcendent value, which is mediated through scientific reports, emotional journalism and tourist brands. However, in everyday urban life this legend meets another narrative — of peripheral neglect — typical for many industrial centers in which the river is historically perceived as a drainage ditch or transport artery. The clash of these two stories generates unique normative interactions: pressure exerted by activists appealing to the sacred-ecological narrative tightens environmental legislation and demands on enterprises; this, in turn, gives rise to a counter-narrative

of hindering development and excessive regulation, typical for part of the regional business community and authorities. Thus, protests against any development or production potentially dangerous for the river acquire not local but global scale and legitimacy, drawing strength from the meta-narrative of Baikal. The bank of the Selenga becomes both an urban planning territory and a battlefield for an ethical and cultural future — every economic practice is evaluated through the prism of its conformity to the legend of sacred purity.

*Perm: battle between industrial heritage and post-industrial aspirations.* Perm is a model of tense and dynamic conflict between two powerful opposing narratives. On one hand, there is an industrial-progressivist narrative of the Kama as a working river, the main transport artery and energy resource for the city's image as a mechanical engineering and chemistry center, which is materialized in cargo ports, industrial zones near water and urban-industrial identity. On the other hand, over the past two decades, a narrative of the cultural capital of the Urals has been promoted by cultural activists and part of the administration — the river should become an aesthetic and recreational framework, Permian Maelstroms (a well-known artistic allusion). This conflict is embodied in spatial battles: disputes over the fate of port territories, which some consider a logical place for prestigious residential development with views, others — as an integral part of the industrial landscape and memory; struggle for public access to the shore historically “locked” by enterprises. Daily practices of citizens are determined by these two logics: fishing or trips to the dacha as a connection with the utilitarian past and visiting new art festivals on the renovated embankment to inscribe oneself into the new creative myth. Perm shows how the river becomes a battlefield for the future image of the city, since every practice and object on riverbanks is an argument in the dispute between the narrative of industrial heritage and the narrative of post-industrial development.

*Yekaterinburg: imported narrative and resistance from the margins.* Yekaterinburg, located on the slope of the Urals, initially had a weaker and more mediated connection to the Iset River, long perceived more as a chain of technogenic pond-reservoirs than as a single water flow. The key narrative here is one of the river's secondary importance or oblivion, displaced in the collective consciousness by more powerful symbols — factories, railway, skyscrapers. However, it is precisely this marginality in recent years that has made the Iset and its embankments a field for experiments in producing a new narrative. The discourse of authorities and developers tries to promote the myth of a European-type urban river — with cafés, promenades, views and glamorous life by the water, materialized in development projects. But this artificial narrative encounters resistance from two forces. First, ecological activists insist on the narrative of a reviving river, fight for clean channels, against dumping and for biodiversity. Second, informal communities that use abandoned sections of riverbanks for their practices (graffiti, parkour) create grassroots, tactical

narratives of their own, unregulated river. Thus, Yekaterinburg demonstrates a complex process — a weak historical narrative about the river is being replaced by a new, project-based one, but this attempt encounters both rational ecological critique and spontaneous resistance from those who value the river for its marginality and freedom from top-down scripts.

Thus, the river in the Russian city is always an active semiotic and political field. Legends about it, be it the imperial saga of Saint Petersburg, the melancholic parable of Voronezh or the ecological sacralization of Ulan-Ude, are not decoration but operating systems of urban life. They prescribe behavioral patterns, legitimize or delegitimize power decisions, mobilize citizens to action. Their daily practices are ways for living these narratives, constantly confirming or revising them. Therefore, an urban conflict on riverbanks is rarely just a dispute about square meters, access to water or environmental risks, it is rather a conflict of interpretations, a clash of competing legends about what the river is for the city: heritage, threat, resource or forgotten channel. The success or failure of urban planning projects, efficiency of communication between authorities and residents, and the very possibility of reaching public consensus directly depend on the ability of all parties to recognize, understand and negotiate fundamental urban river stories.

### **River as a narrative landscape and a challenge for urban studies**

The conducted analysis moved beyond utilitarian or purely symbolic interpretations of the river, presenting it as a dynamic narrative landscape — a complex multi-layered communicative field whose meanings determine the very fabric of urban life. Their materialization is not metaphoric but literal — through the granite of embankments and dams, routes of daily movement and leisure scenarios, urban planning regulations and slogans on protest posters. The urban river legend loses its status as a folklore anachronism and turns into an effective social means, a technology of the collective sense-making of space, whose power stems from its ability to connect the deep past with immediate practice, bodily experience — with normative order. The city's identity is enacted by the water, under the tension between canonical myth and traumatic memory, sacralization and oblivion, where every act of planning or protest becomes a part in the unfinished drama of interpretations.

The main theoretical framework for the analysis of this tension is the proposed three-level synthesis — sociology of practices, narrative analysis, and media theory. This synthesis allows to overcome the traditional gap between the study of the material urban environment and the analysis of its symbolic dimensions. The practical enactment of the city by the river is impossible without the constantly renewed narrativization, while narratives gain social efficiency only by being embedded in specific media environments — from the museum

display case to the messenger app chat. This approach opens a perspective for researching other key elements of the urban fabric — hills, parks, industrial zones — as similar meaning- and practice-forming complexes in which physical form and social myth are inseparable.

On a practical and political level, the research reveals a fundamental cause of chronic difficulties and conflicts in managing river spaces — the parties present different narratives, appealing to incompatible value systems rooted in different legends of place. Municipal authorities, promoting a comprehensive beautification project, appeal to the narrative of progress and functional efficiency; the developer speaks of investments and territorial development; the urban activists resist, defending not an abstract environment but a specific narrative complex — be it a historical panorama supporting identity, memory of a lost authenticity of place or sacred status of a natural object. Protests are often an attempt to protect the integrity of a story of place from a narrative perceived as alien and destructive. Failure to understand this deep narrative controversy reduces dialogues to technical disputes that ignore the essence of disagreement, while administrative and forceful methods only perpetuate the conflict.

Consequently, the key challenge for contemporary urban regulation and social design is the development of narrative competence. Development of river territories cannot be limited to functional zoning, engineering calculations or economic models and should start with a thorough narrative audit — mapping those stories, myths, fears and hopes that different urban communities associate with the river and its banks. It is necessary to recognize the legitimacy of such multiple, often contradictory narratives and create institutional platforms and communicative formats (from participatory design to public discussions) in which these stories would be compared and, possibly, synthesized into a new common narrative of the place's future. Such work requires from city managers, developers and designers not only technical knowledge but also skills in mediating meanings and understanding the logic of cultural memory and local identity.

Thus, the river is not a peripheral element but a semantic and political center of the contemporary city. Its banks are frontlines for the main dramas of post-Soviet urbanism: the search for identity between the imperial past and uncertain future, the conflict between the logic of market-driven development and the value of collective memory, the struggle for the right to the city as both meaningful and functional space. The ability of Russian cities to develop new, more inclusive models of developing river “framework” will become one of the most important criteria of their maturity, sustainability and human dimension in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The river as a legend turns from just an object of study into a challenge and a guide for a new urbanistic thought and practice, in which design of space inevitably merges with design of meanings.

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## Городские легенды о реке как медиаторы урбанистических практик и нормативных взаимодействий\*

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**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена исследованию роли городских легенд и нарративов, сконцентрированных вокруг рек, в формировании городских практик, интеракций и нормативных режимов. Выходя за рамки традиционной трактовки реки как экономического или символического ресурса, авторы предлагают концептуализировать ее как комплексного медиатора, чье влияние осуществляется через циркулирующие в городе нарративы. Легенды о реке (ее основании, наводнениях, затопленных святынях, мифических обитателях) представлены в статье не как фольклорный пережиток, а как активные акторы в сетях городской коммуникации, которые материализуются в пространственном планировании, повседневных практиках горожан и законодательных ограничениях. Теоретическая рамка исследования объединяет подходы урбанистической антропологии, медиа теории (в частности, идею «медиа как окружения») и социологию повседневности (взаимодействий). На примере российских городов (Санкт-Петербург, Воронеж, Улан-Удэ, Пермь, Екатеринбург) показано, через какие каналы (официальный культурный нарратив, социальные медиа, туристические гиды, устные истории) легенды транслируются и как они влияют на конкретные городские процессы: от протестов против застройки набережных до формирования экологических норм и правил благоустройства. Авторы полагают, что конкуренция нарративов о реке («живая история» — «инженерный объект», «сакральное начало» — «природная угроза») лежит в основе многих современных городских конфликтов. Умение властей и профессиональных сообществ работать с этими нарративными средами, а не игнорировать их становится ключевым фактором в управлении городским развитием и достижении общественного согласия.

**Ключевые слова:** городская река; урбанистика; городские легенды; медиация; нарратив; городские практики; нормативные взаимодействия; социальные интеракции; коллективная память; символическая география

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