DOI: 10.23817/2026.defarch.2-14

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THE PHILOSOPHY OF ARCHITECTURE: NAVIGATING BETWEEN CONCEPT AND REALITY

FILOZOFIA ARCHITEKTURY – MIĘDZY IDEĄ A RZECZYWISTOŚCIĄ

Abstract

The article discusses the issue of shaping and perceiving architectural spaces in relation to form, function and meaning, using the example of the Jewish Museum in Berlin by Daniel Libeskind.
It attempts to answer the question: to what extent architecture is the materialisation of an idea, and whether its perception, though not always unambiguous, fits within the framework of its assigned meaning. The questions posed are intended to guide the identification of architectural space, and the applied methods – observation, heuristic analysis and a case study – will facilitate our current understanding of the meaning of architectural creation in relation to the principles of utility, durability and beauty as sine qua non.

Keywords: *architecture, idea, perception, philosophy, space*

Streszczenie

Artykuł porusza problematykę kształtowania i percepcji przestrzeni architektonicznych w odniesieniu do formy, funkcji i znaczenia na przykładzie Muzeum Żydowskiego w Berlinie autorstwa Daniela Libeskinda. Stanowi próbę znalezienia odpowiedzi na pytanie: w jakim stopniu architektura jest materializacją idei i czy odbiór, nie zawsze jednoznaczny, mieści się w ramach przypisanego jej znaczenia. Postawione pytania prowadzić mają do znalezienia właściwej drogi identyfikacji przestrzeni architektonicznej, a zastosowane metody, obserwacyjna, heurystyczna oraz case study, ułatwić dzisiejsze pojmowanie sensu kreacji architektury w odniesieniu do reguły użyteczności, trwałości i piękna jako warunku *sine qua non*.

Słowa kluczowe: *architektura, filozofia, idea, percepcja, przestrzeń*

1. INTRODUCTION

"Beauty always appears to me as captured in images, in clearly defined fragments of reality, in the form of an object or a still life, or as a cohesive scene, composed without a trace of effort or artificiality. Everything is as it should be; everything is in its rightful place"[1]. Peter Zumthor aptly compares architecture to a painting and to beauty, a term he uses to describe the perfection of the designed form. In the context of architectural perception,

[1] P. Zumthor, *Myślenie architekturą*, Karakter, Kraków 2010, p. 76.

beauty is composed of many elements, including shapes, volumes, patterns, proportions, compositional arrangements, the interplay of contrasts, and so on. We can attribute these to the external appearance, perceived upon first encounter with the architectural form. Having familiarised ourselves with what is visible to the naked eye, we are invited inside and enter into a process of multisensory perception of the space. We cross the threshold of the exterior composition and open ourselves up to three-dimensional experiences which, when combined in the right proportions, with appropriately selected materials and based on the correct structure, merge into a single, multi-layered sensation. This sensation is built up over time and is experienced differently by each viewer; however, the subjective experiences anticipated by the designer fall within the bounds of the projected objectivity. This is what the ideal scenario for good architecture should look like. This is how architecture should be: shaped by the architect's narrative, clear yet unpredictable, simple yet not naive, unique yet not garish. With these principles in mind, an attempt was made to analyse the space of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, designed by Daniel Libeskind, treating the architectural form as a materialised idea that serves as a content medium for both present and future users.

2. ARCHITECTURE – VALUE, CONTENT, MESSAGE / STATE OF RESEARCH

Architecture as a content medium – ideological architecture embodying timeless values – is a subject that provokes much controversy due to the lack of specific tools for assessing the character and quality of given architectural spaces. One might argue that the most important elements are those that constitute architecture, creating an atmosphere of calm or unease, concentration or distraction, grandeur or intimacy. There is nothing wrong with architecture appearing neutral to the observer, but it should not be lifeless[2]. Its value is enhanced by the symbolism that embodies an idea and a corresponding philosophy. As Juhani Pallasmaa states, "the timeless task of architecture is to create tangible and living existential metaphors that concretize and organize our existence in the world. Architecture reflects, materialises and immortalises the ideas and images of the ideal life"[3]. "Is it therefore possible, in this day and age, to create a work with timeless values?"[4] This is the question posed by Z.W. Paszkowski in his study, referring to the changes that have taken place over the course of the ages and arguing that it is for future generations to make such judgements. Or, to echo P. Zumthor: "Beauty is an experience. (…) We see a captured, condensed form, a shape or a manner of formation that moves us; it has the quality of being many things, indeed, perhaps even everything at once: obvious, calm, composed, natural, dignified, profound, mysterious, inspiring, moving, exciting…"[5], can we assume that these values are and will remain relevant? That they also encompass the comfort of use, which

[2] Conference papers: an excerpt from a text prepared for the International *Conference – Defining Architectural Space*, covering the theme: "Architecture and Experience", Kraków 2026.

[3] J. Pallasmaa, *Oczy skóry*, Instytut Architektury, Kraków 2012, p. 83.

[4] Z.W. Paszkowski, *Ponadczasowe wartości w architekturze*, "Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura" 2011, no. 108(4-A), pp. 300–309, https://repozytorium.biblos.pk.edu.pl/redo/resources/32343/file/resourceFiles/PaszkowskiZ_PonadczasoweArchitekturze.pdf (access: 28.05.2026).

[5] P. Zumthor, *Myślenie architekturą*, Karakter, Kraków 2010, p. 77.

is etched into our memory just as firmly as the beauty of form? T. Dyckhoff examines the value of architecture in financial terms: "The appearance of a building, however, influences its impact and, consequently, the profits it can generate"[6]. But should this aspect be a defining factor in architectural design? Will it fade away, leaving behind only a memory of the prosperity of that era? M. Fuksas presents an interesting approach to the design of architectural spaces when he says that "Architecture, like film, is infected by the ebb and flow of the present"[7], with a view to capturing current events and the emotions they evoke. Expanding on this idea, E. Rewers writes: "The city buzzes with emotions that constitute one of the most characteristic rhythmic threads of any space: fear and euphoria, joy and melancholy, aggression and a sense of security"[8]. J. Barnaś discusses the approach to the criterion of beauty as the essence of architectural quality, analysing this aspect throughout history. "The criterion of beauty has accompanied the process of creating architecture from the very beginning, playing a significant role in this process due to the fact that architecture, as a field of art, has for centuries combined and utilised other areas of art – painting and sculpture. With the progress of civilisation and the development of new media, the list of artistic disciplines utilised continues to expand"[9]. If we were to follow his reasoning, should we perhaps view architecture solely through the prism of a broadly defined and non-objective assessment of beauty? M. Zieliński also presents an interesting viewpoint: "The architectural values that have become the basis for the design of architectural structures influence both their value in the broad sense – the value of architecture as such – and their value in the strict sense – their material economic value"[10]. By way of contrast, we might recall the words of H. Ibelings: "The value of beautiful, comfortable architecture is rarely expressed in economic terms; even if beauty and comfort come at a higher price, this disparity is undoubtedly not as great as in the fine arts, where a square metre of painted canvas may be worth a few euros or a hundred million"[11]. Ibelings argues that one of the reasons why the value of architecture does not lie in its cultural or artistic significance is that a building's economic value is influenced by its constituent parts; he also points out that this value generally diminishes over time. A. Szmitkowska[12] attempts to identify "direct, reciprocal associations between modernist architecture and philosophy", thereby contributing to the age-old, never-ending discourse on this subject. In this context, the words of M. Zieliński can be considered apt: "The concept of value, and in particular the formulation of a uniform definition of it, is no easy task, especially given the existence of

[6] T. Dyckhoff, *Epoka spektaklu. Perypetie architektury i miasta XXI wieku*, Karakter, Kraków 2018, p. 142.

[7] M. Fuksas*, Na nowy wiek*, trans. J. Giecewicz, "Architektura" 2003, no. 2, p. 10.

[8] E. Rewers, *Post-Polis. Wstęp do filozofii ponowoczesnego miasta*, Universitas, Kraków 2005, p. 323.

[9] J. Barnaś, *Kryterium piękna w architekturze*, "Czasopismo Techniczne Architektura" 2007, no 104(6-A), p. 176, https://repozytorium.biblos.pk.edu.pl/redo/resources/34720/file/suwFiles/BarnasJ_KryteriumPiekna.pdf (access: 02.06.2026).

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[11] H. Ibelings et al., *Nowe wartości na nowe czasy*, Anna Niemierko (ill.), "Architektura Murator", 14.06.2019, https://architektura.muratorplus.pl/biblioteka/nowe-wartosci-na-nowe-czasy-aa-TXZa-jA4e-GWTS.html (access: 04.06.2026).

[12] A. Szmitkowska, *Filozoficzne tło architektury modernistycznej*, "Architecturae et Artibusa" 2016, no 8(3), p. 172.

various schools and axiological approaches"[13]. M. Wicha, for his part, suggests: "Architecture, whether better or worse, avant-garde or conservative, ultimately deals with time. It is architecture that creates an image of the past. Architecture attempts to design the future. And, of course, it fails, because the future always differs from our imaginings"[14]. How, then, should we approach the nature and meaning of architecture? How should we understand it, and is it even possible to understand architecture at all? Where does the architect's message lie; is it legible, or is it merely a vessel to be filled by people?

3. IDEA, FORM, MESSAGE

The Jewish Museum in Berlin, designed by Daniel Libeskind, is a deeply moving space that speaks louder than words or exhibits. "It is a place that brings together history, architecture and emotion"[15]. To understand the meaning of this architecture, appreciate its value and recognise its beauty, one must pay attention to the design nuances that lie at the heart of the architect's vision. It takes experience, awareness and emotional intelligence to create a good composition, and a good composition is one from which nothing can be taken away or added to. To do so would disrupt its layout and order. In the museum spaces designed by Daniel Libeskind, the details are irreplaceable; their absence could disrupt the proper perception and understanding of the architect's message. S.E. Rasmussen, by treating "the building as a composition of voids"[16], touches upon the very essence of architectural design, the purpose of which is to convey specific content. And just as the exterior of the Jewish Museum in Berlin may be regarded as a controversial form, aggressively cutting into the fabric of the city, so, on closer inspection, one can perceive the multidimensional nature of its spaces. The unconventional arrangement of planes, designed like a path leading towards an unknown abyss, creates a structure resembling a labyrinth. The message contained within this composition evokes associations with the arduous, tortuous journey that people were forced to undertake on their way to concentration camps, where their fates were equally uncertain – sometimes surprisingly brief, or dragging on for months amidst existential anguish. The sharp cuts in the titanium-zinc-clad façades may be associated with wounds etched by time, with the tattoo marks on the prisoners' forearms, and with drawings of Jewish symbols that were forbidden. The reality in which we find ourselves when engaging with the museum's architectural form serves as a starting point for dialogue and a search for answers. These are prompts that are difficult to ignore. A reality that gives us the chance to experience a thoughtfully composed space imbued with the author's philosophical reflections. And so we begin our journey in tribute to the dead, descending into the underground level to pay homage to the history of German Jews. The concept, based on three main axes that intersect underground, is another signature feature incorporated into the design. The Axis of Continuity, leading to the former courthouse, symbolises the

[13] M. Zieliński, *op. cit*., p. 44.
[14] M. Wicha, *Proste rzeczy*, Agora, Warszawa 2026, p. 112.
[15] T. Filipek, *Muzeum Żydowskie w Berlinie. Historia, architektura i wystawa*, "Krok za horyzont", https://krokzahoryzont.pl/muzeum-zydowskie-w-berlinie/ (access: 06.06.2026).
[16] S.E. Rasmussen, *Odczuwanie architektury*, trans. B. Gadomska, Wydawnictwo Murator, Warszawa 1999, p. 48.

historical presence of Jews in Germany; the Axis of Exile, leading to the garden of the same name, represents the outside world, the space beyond the safe confines of "four walls"; and finally, the Axis of the Holocaust, like that of condemned prisoners, leads to a dead end, the so-called Voids. The sloping floors and narrow, steep corridors inside the building are a deliberate design feature, as are the irregular walls; a design intended to evoke a sense of unease, disorientation and confusion. Grey, gloom and empty, concrete spaces – inaccessible to visitors – cutting vertically through the entire building, commemorate a tragic absence: the void left by those murdered. The museum's distinctive asceticism evokes deeply moving emotions. "A sensory experience, enclosed within concrete walls, with light rarely filtering through the creeping cracks, is an experience that encompasses all the senses"[17]. The evocative symbolism, the space imbued with meaning, and the depiction of the chaos that the Holocaust has left on the history of the Jewish people – this is the mature language of architecture; a language that is understandable, at times discreet and subdued, and at other times powerful, emphatic and strident, weaving a coherent narrative.

4. THE PHILOSOPHY OF IMAGE

Images speak louder, get through to us faster, and stay with us for a long time. Visual sensations, arising from the nervous system's reception and processing of light signals, enable us to see and give rise to images and visual impressions. They convey the reality that surrounds us. The way the space of the Jewish Museum is shaped constitutes an expressive statement, in which architectural features such as the restrained use of light, the austere finishes, and the unusually laid-out corridors and walls are the architect's "words" forming a manifesto-warning (Ill. 1a–b), echoed by the warning spoken by Marian Turski during the commemorations of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp:

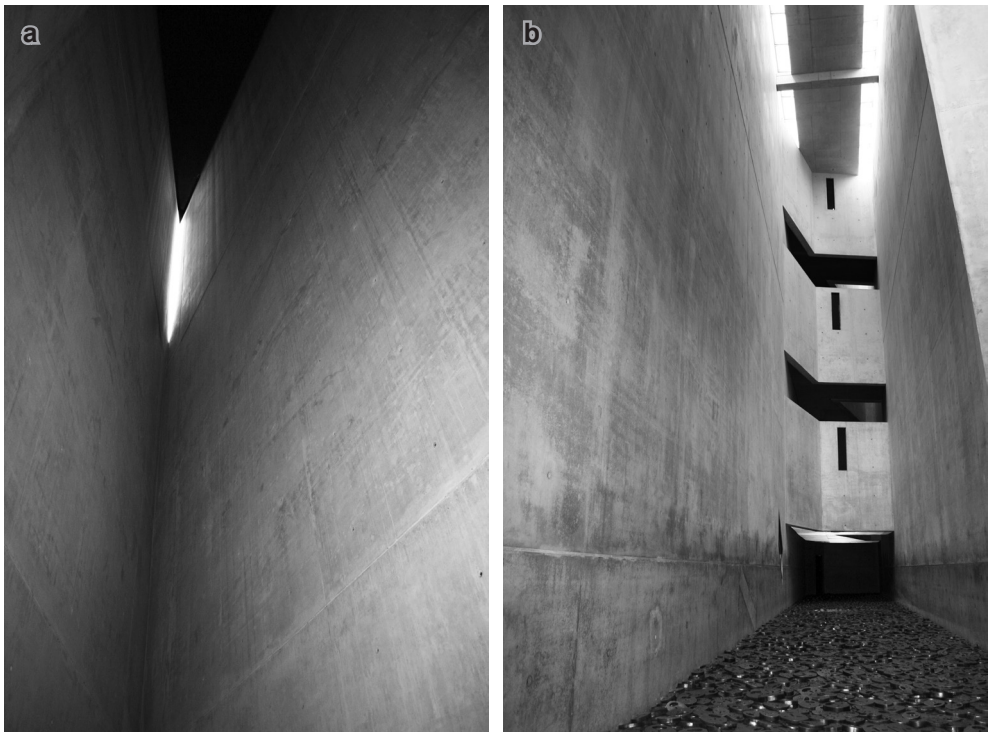
> This is very important – do not remain indifferent when you see historical lies. Do not remain indifferent when you see the past being distorted for the sake of current politics. Do not remain indifferent when any minority is discriminated against, for the essence of democracy is that the majority rules, but democracy also means that the rights of minorities must be protected at the same time. Do not remain indifferent when any authority violates established social contracts that are already in place. Be faithful to the commandments. The eleventh commandment: do not be indifferent, for if you are, before you know it, 'some kind of Auschwitz' will suddenly fall from the sky upon you and your descendants[18].

The interior of the Holocaust Tower, shown in the photograph – a stark, concrete space with a narrow slit of light at the top – and the interior of "Memory Void" are characterised by a unique interplay between the museum's content and Daniel Libeskind's architecture. The art installation "Fallen Leaves" by the Israeli sculptor Menashe Kadishman is situated on the concrete floor (Ill. 2a–c).

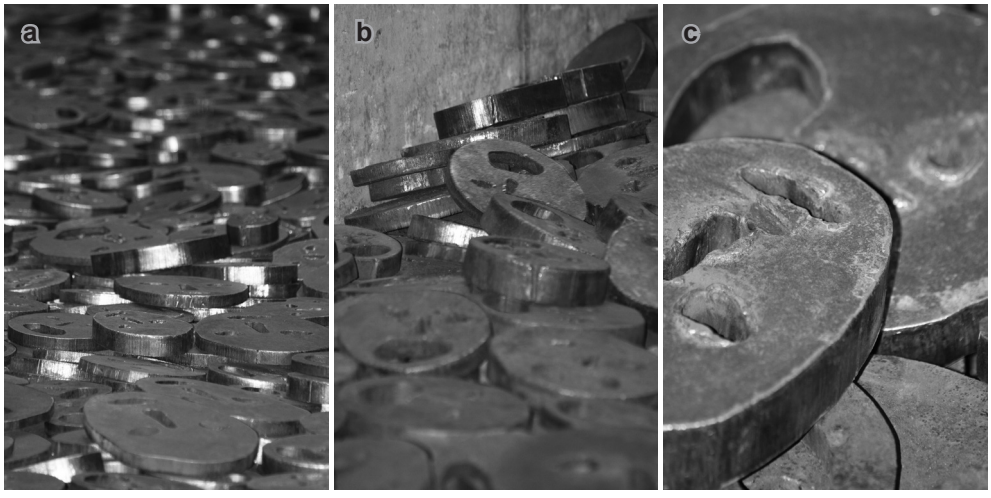
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[17] K. Słuchocka, *Can architecture lie?*, [in:] *International Conference – Defining Architectural Space, Truth and Lies in Architecture*, vol. 3., Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut, Wrocław 2020, p. 110.

[18] Excerpt from a speech delivered in Oświęcim during the commemorations marking the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp (https://tvn24.pl) 27.06.2020 by Marian Turski (1926–2025) – historian, journalist and former Auschwitz prisoner.



Ill. 1. a) The interior of the Holocaust Tower at the Jewish Museum in Berlin: a stark, concrete corridor with a narrow slit of light at the top; b) the interior of "Memory Void" at the Jewish Museum in Berlin; Jewish Museum, Berlin / designed by Studio Libeskind; photos: K. Słuchocka



Ill. 2. a–c: the art installation "Fallen Leaves" by the Israeli sculptor Menashe Kadishman, situated within the "Memory Void" at the Jewish Museum in Berlin; Jewish Museum, Berlin / designed by Studio Libeskind; photos: K. Słuchocka

An installation comprising over 10,000 heavy faces cut from iron, like a monument in honour of the dead, symbolically demands silence and respect. The rust covering them dulls their lustre, merging them into a massive composition. However, it is unable to obscure their form, just as time should not erase or soften the starkness of violence and cruelty. Streaks of light falling from above focus our attention on the plane and the "incalculable" number of victims. The deliberate inclusion of linear, horizontal openings does not compete with the artistic installation; rather, it guides visitors' movement, whilst the absence of any details on the walls acts as a catalyst, amplifying the sounds of footsteps and conversation whilst simultaneously encouraging silence. In this context, meanings play a central role, including the terrifying screech of the doors closing as they lead to the Holocaust Tower (Ill. 3).



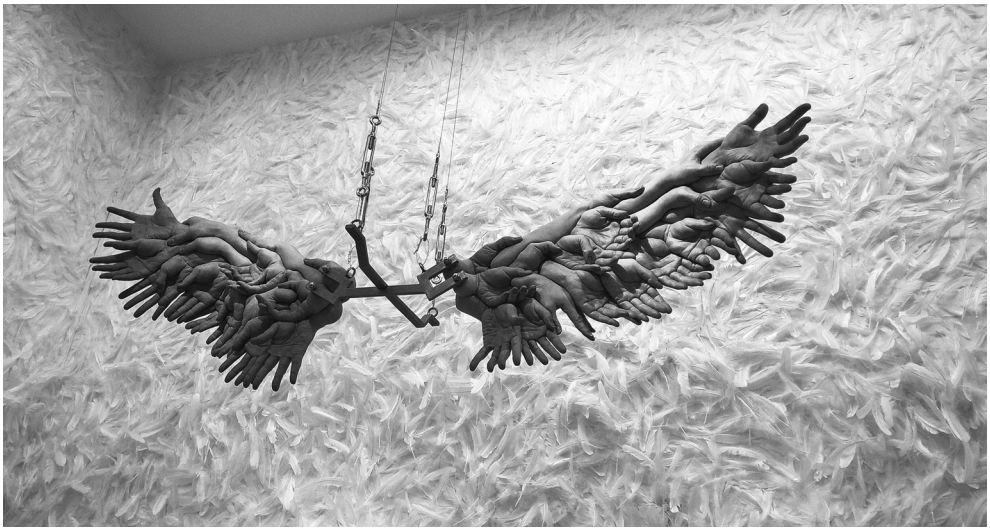
Ill. 3. Steel door inside the Holocaust Tower at the Jewish Museum in Berlin; Jewish Museum, Berlin / designed by Studio Libeskind; photo: K. Słuchocka

The rugged, industrial steel doors, with a non-standard, unevenly fitted frame set at an angle, slam shut behind visitors as they enter the tower under its own weight. The loud sound of the doors closing is an attempt to illustrate a situation from which there is no escape. It is a sound that is hard to forget.

The overall colour scheme, in shades of dark grey, with no attempt to embellish or conceal fixings, brackets or joints, emphasises the impression of authenticity and alludes to the makeshift nature of the interiors in concentration camps. The deliberate use of raw materials serves as a guide through spaces that hold memories, associations and interpretations – spaces that do not overwhelm with their form, but rather with their emotional tension and the impressions visitors carry with them when they leave the walls of the Jewish Museum in Berlin.

5. SUMMARY

A fitting conclusion might be the sculpture depicting bound hands, "The Wings" (2009), created by the South Korean artist Choi Xooang. The work, made of resin and oil and composed of dozens of miniature, interconnected human hands, resembles angelic or bird-like wings (Ill. 4). A symbol of both freedom and enslavement – an oxymoron. A surrealist project embodying pain and serving as an enduring symbol of the quest to free oneself from suffering. Temporarily suspended within the spaces of the Jewish Museum, the sculpture draws attention to issues of alienation and human rights and forcefully proclaims the idea of life's struggle against death and reminds us that, regardless of where we happen to live, work, rest, learn and die, the path we tread has a specific purpose. Over time, we come to realise that we do not need much to be able to perceive what is most important; on the contrary, amidst chaos, excess and opulence, we may overlook the essence of our existence. Unfortunately, it is often already too late.



Ill. 4. The sculpture "The Wings" by Choi Xooang, 2009, resin, oil; temporary exhibition, Jewish Museum Berlin; photo: K. Słuchocka

The spaces of the Jewish Museum are designed to encourage contemplation, tranquillity and self-reflection. They engage visitors in a dialogue with history, sensorially reinforcing the architect's message embedded in the design. They provide a space for reflection on the essence, purpose and significance of spatial design. One might say that "the poetic image is based on a visual image that enhances the effect of the space as seen from the hill. The passage reaches its climax regardless of whether it is read aloud or not"[19]. The materialised manifestation of Daniel Libeskind's vision is linked to the experience of space, perceived through sight, hearing and smell, as well as through thermal and kinaesthetic sensations. The sensory nature of the museum's architecture, rooted in its conceptual foundation, engages all the senses so that the spatial experience is perceived in its entirety and, ultimately, constitutes a synthesis of complementary sensory inputs.

[19] E.T. Hall, *Ukryty wymiar*, Warszawskie Wydawnictwo Literackie MUZA, Warszawa 1997, p. 124.

Unique interiors encased within an outer form that embodies an idea – a book of memories rich in content and bound within a sturdy frame. The frame, shaped like a zigzagging chain, forms yet another reference to the philosophy of meaning. The association with the characteristic form of defensive fortifications may, after all, signify a desire to enclose, to preserve in a safe place – a place that guarantees the survival of memories of events and of those who have passed away.

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