

# ART IN A SOCIAL CONTEXT

## AA PROJECT



Delta/ Mega-engineering and the idea of Progress / proposing alternative and sustainable realities through the conjunction of art and politics.



The aim of this project is to create by means of a political and artistic intervention, a permanent installation conceived as a social sculpture and designed as a space for the survival of those people affected by floods or any other disasters caused by aggressive mega-engineering in the Río de la Plata basin. It has the purpose of creating both the conceptual and actual

design with the cooperation of the affected community and a wide range of public participation.

Besides, the project intends to create a non-established communication access for those who suffer the effects of action that has threatened sustainability, and to prepare a global action for cultural exchange as a means of communication and participation through artistic and lively concepts that challenge traditional ways of art expression, placing art as a social strategy.

It is planned to create a survival communication module in order to make those victims of disasters not only the recipients of public charity but actors and communicators of their real problems as well.

### THE OBJECTIVE:

The objective of this project is to raise the social attention in relation to flood effects and the aggression of mega-engineering and to make people aware of the cultural forces outside the corporate decision network for these enterprises and of their effects on them.

This will be achieved through:

- \* a real improvement of living conditions for those who are temporary homeless (development, design and building of emergency modules through self-construction techniques);
- \* cultural and labour restoration for the communities affected by ecological disasters; survival strategies.

## PROJECT GENESIS

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Since 1995, Ala Plástica has been developing a long-term artistic project along the delta and estuary of the Río de la Plata (River Plate) that focuses on the coastal communities' creativity by interconnecting different groups working on the determination of local development objectives –according to their own values- and by setting up new relationships between them and public and private realms, with the idea of taking advantage of local cultural remnants as a vehicle for social and environmental regeneration.

A constellation of actions have been performed so far. The first stage was to identify local actors and entities and the second stage comprised the coordination of work, through a participative process, for the emergence of ideas and actions to be carried out by the same people involved.

These strategies of critical urbanism or territorialism, most of which related to the natural ecology and biophysics of the area, are set up like a natural process and they appear as an alternative against authoritarian systems that describe reality.

Our overriding project **Bioregional Initiative** is aimed at exploring new and creative ways to actively and publicly interpret, develop and apply alternative social/environmental profiles in areas such as Río de la Plata basin and riverside urban places.

This aim manifests itself through creative and interconnected initiatives based on a real social transformation and environmental recovery processes all over the mentioned area. A rising extended objectivity on environmental, social and economic complexes. We believe in the need of new visions that may fortify the debate from the socio-ecological point of view against the one-sided techno-political conceptions that support this kind of projects.

On par with our locally concentrated task, our work is naturally expanding towards the broader bioregional approach on the basin of the de la Plata-Paraná-Paraguay-Uruguay rivers, where, as key examples, there are government supported projects like Hidrovía (The Great Waterway) and Punta Lara-Colonia Bridge connecting Argentina and Uruguay with a length of over 50 km. across the Río de la Plata estuary. They are mega-engineering enterprises conceived for extending navigability and transport in general over the whole basin, but with unforeseen or just ignored environmental, social and economic consequences.

In 1998 Projects Environment organised the **CRITICAL SITES: Issues in Critical Art Practice and Pedagogy Conference**, with the Dublin artist's group Critical Access, at Dun Laoghaire Institute of Technology, Art and Design.

The 1998 Dublin conference took up the issue of education and training for socially engaged art practice, but there is room for more debate and encounters on this issue with active groups and projects represented from Thailand, Australia, Austria, Canada, USA, Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Senegal, Sudan, South Africa, New Zealand, Poland, Luxembourg, Lithuania, Israel, Ireland and Britain.

In that significant conference we met with Erwin Posarnig and the experience of the project KUNST:/ ABSEITS VOM NETZ in the Austrian city of Graz.

Both groups now communicate regularly via e-mail and Internet websites, and generate critical writing and documentation about this work, and its connections with mainstream cultural, environmental and social practice.

In December 2000, Ala Plástica visited the city of Graz in Austria with the objective of having a direct contact with the experience of KUNST:/ ABSEITS VOM NETZ project, (<http://kavn.mur.at>) and to exchange some considerations about the possibility of developing a joint project in Argentina. We visited two urban places with its leader, Erwin Posarnig, and his team. These places were part of a long-term project that had been started in 1996 with the idea incidence over living conditions of excluded social groups by means of the creation of project for homeless people under the concepts of sculpture -installation, temporary-permanent, as a survival space.



According to Posarnig, long-term projects of this kind confront short-term sensational exhibition proposals which reflect a critical portrait of social conditions and the art system exclusively developed for the benefit of the "educated" society.

## LOCATION AND CONTEXT OF THE EXPERIENCE

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The Paraná River, that flows through a large fault of continental magnitude and has a length of 2,570 km., constitutes one of the axial tributaries of the huge Río de la Plata basin. Having a total surface of 1,500,000 km<sup>2</sup>, it is second to the Amazon for its importance in South America and it flows across an area that comprises part of the political territories of Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, Bolivia and Argentina.





The delta of the Paraná River , with a surface of about 1,750,000 Has.(14,000 Km<sup>2</sup>) , has a length of 320 Km and a very variable width – it ranges from 18 km at Baradero to more than 60 km between the Luján and Gutierrez rivers. The Paraná River delta is an alive one: it is formed by the sediment deposition of the whole Río de la Plata basin. This characteristic determines the permanent advance of the delta, which is considered to be between 70 to 90 meters per year.

The Delta is a low populated area located in the middle of the so-called Fluvial Industrial Axis, the narrow stripe of 400 km along the Paraná-del Plata riverside between the cities of Santa Fe and La Plata, where half the population of the country and three-quarters of employment and economic activity are concentrated.

Between the end of the XIX and the early XX centuries, a process of transformation began in the Delta ´s landscape mainly due to the influence of the European immigration (Polish, Italian, Spanish, French ,Russian, etc.)

When the first farmers began to exploit the Delta resources, the soil use was dominated by extensive agriculture (mainly cereal) and later by horticulture and fruit production.

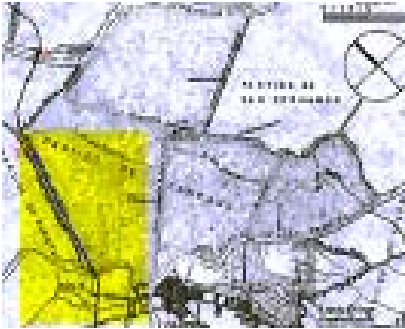
In 1855 stateman Domingo F.Sarmiento introduced from Chile the first willow plants for his nursery in a Delta ´s island of his own property with the purpose of encouraging local people to grow them. Nowadays the Delta is the most important territory for Salix growing and processing in Argentina and probably in South America. Willows became and still are an important source of income for the Delta ´s economy.

The Delta is for its natural conditions and social-economic characteristics an uncommon area in the whole region, with very particular and quite well-defined internal processes, although always dependant on the external realm with which it interacts. In this way, the area combines realities of the Delta particular system with regional and even national realities.

One of those particular features is that the Delta is continually threatened by floods. It must be pointed out that Argentina, which is part of the so-called underdeveloped world, is among the seven countries whose flood vulnerability reaches more than 1% of the Gross Internal Product. In strictly economic terms, it is the most vulnerable country in South America.

## THE PLACE

### FARM SCHOOL Nº 25 IRIGOYEN CANAL TALAVERA ISLAND, DELTA Its background and its problems



For many reasons and in general, schools function as organizers of the social life of the inhabitants of the Delta. The school Nº 25 on the Irigoyen canal, located S 33° 53' 817"; W 59° 01' 342" extends his influence over one of the poorest and more isolated zones in the Delta. It has a very particular location: it is between old Nº 12 route and Irigoyen canal, separated one from the other by less than 200 meters. It is an area that has been deeply affected in the last 20 years by the construction of the Zárate-Brazo Largo complex. Far from bringing benefits for the local population, this railroad-motorway complex (an uninterrupted embankment of 30 km in length and with a height of 4 meters) has become a factor of social and economic isolation for the adjacent area, and it is an aggravating factor of the effects of the rise of the Paraná river. This has transformed a zone traditionally dedicated to tourism, with a significant number of campsites, recreational facilities, fishing places and once a source of work for the settlers, into a succession of semi-abandoned estates, without services and settled by families with serious problems and limited mainly to hunting and fishing activities for survival. In this context, the school acquires a leading role within the community. It is recognized as an active community pole which, apart from fulfilling the role of an educational institution (it has pre-school children and EGB—Educación General Básica- with 250 students and shares the facilities with the Agrarian School Nº 1) it acts as a relief realm of the social and economic problems of around 100 families to which the students belong. Its educational project aims at integrating the classes with the activities of the community in order to address detected situations which affect most of the families of the area such as unemployment, floods, isolation. The basis for this sustained action is a strong local leadership on the part of school authorities and people who cooperate so that significant results are achieved, with an



stress on the balanced cooperation and participation of all the actors (local people, the government, the private sector). Some of the actions that have been developed are:

- \* Production projects with participation of the adult population, based on the use of appropriate technologies : extraction of peat, carpentry, organic orchards, beekeeping, basketmaking, weaving and sewing.

- \* Construction of embankments and and the the realization of other solutions for protection so that classes are not interrupted during seasonal floods.

- \* The creation of an Educative Farm, with the double purpose of achieving community production and support to the curricular school activities for the students to apply their acquired knowledge.



## PROPOSED ACTIVITIES

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The sphere of action delimited by the Project AA is located in the Río de La Plata estuary and delta. Since the 1970s these places have undergone a critical situation due to social and political problems which have caused the destruction of the social fabric and the community organization. The project AA strategy will demand an acceptable level of organization within the community as well as the development of their own organizational capacities.

The activities proposed will be developed in two stages.

### 1st STAGE

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During this stage Ala Plástica's work will concentrate on the catalysis and register of the different visions people have in this critical area and on the integration of this community to the bioregional strategy.

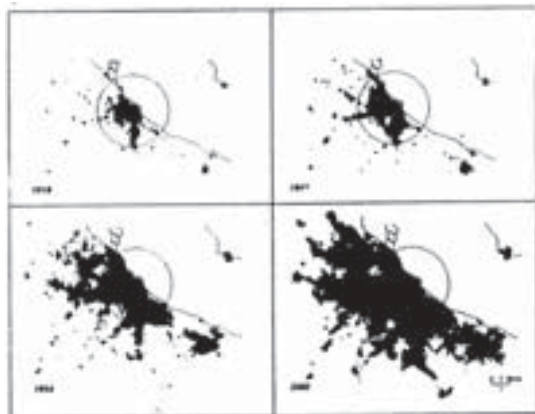
This stage will consist of:

#### a) A bioregional study of the Río de La Plata area and the Paraná delta.

A study of this area (the river itself, the Delta , Greater Buenos Aires and La Plata metropolitan expanding area) with the purpose of achieving a better recognition of it and order to address the development, impact and implications of the expanding and concentrating territorial human occupation.

The proposal is based on the following concepts:

- \* The expansion of satellite imagery's sensitive applications under a bioregional point of view.
- \* The development through this new and effective tool of an inclusive objectivity: another way for human beings to focus themselves within nature.
- \* The question of what human beings are able to build or destroy, and for what reasons.
- \* The exploration of functional and spatial human occupation of the earth as an actual process of biological aggregation and specialization.



\* The right of the communities to reach more sensitive visions of their own situation.

With the intention of:

\* Catalysing a participative process from the communities to reflect a local vision about the situation's genealogy.

\* Elaborating maps and a spacial information bank and identifying community activities in order to stimulate the emergence of actions based on a common will.

\* Documenting this process to enable communities to register indicators of the situation.

\* Identifying stakeholders.

### b) Local Knowledge Recovery

The recovery of local knowledge and skills will be necessary for the study, planification, appropriate and participative design and identification of materials in order to elaborate a suitable work methodology for the production of emergency lodging modules, a recreation centre and a communication room.

The self-construction activity is one of the valuable practices of the Delta cultural history and of the estuary coastal communities and it is especially performed for the creation of clubs, community centres and houses. For that reason this initiative will not represent a strange or whimsical process for the understanding of the actors.

Since this creative experience focuses on emergence, these works generate an intense movement in the people's own appraisal of communal life.

### c) Integration in the Bioregional Network Strategies

-The creation of social, economic and environmental ties among the different actors and active regional groups from the Río de la Plata basin will be fostered through participative practices with the purpose of catalysing the mutual cooperation in continuous and long-lasting projects and of increasing the community strength and self-determination.



Some key issues to begin with:

**- Willow**

Identification of portions of available land to generate production and propose creative and diversified uses as a way to stimulate a participative design to recover and transform areas.

**- Community work on plants and health.**

Identification of native forest endemic flora uses to encourage local people to recover the local knowledge associated with plants and health; to stimulate the formation of a permanent community working group on medicinal plants and to foster the cultivation of some species of special interest.

**- Exercises of displacement:** Exchange activities with regional groups having experience in participative design.

**2nd STAGE**

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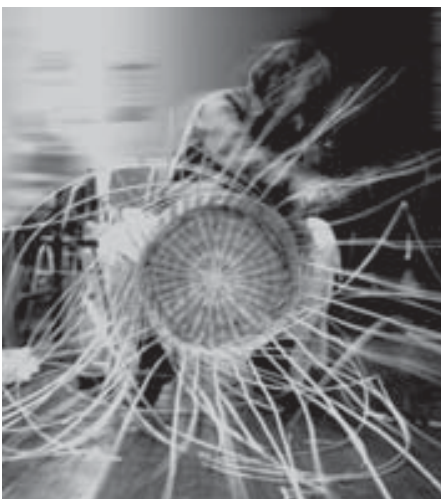
This stage of the project is aimed at the realization of ideas.

**a) Creation of emergency lodging modules, a recreational centre and a communication room.**

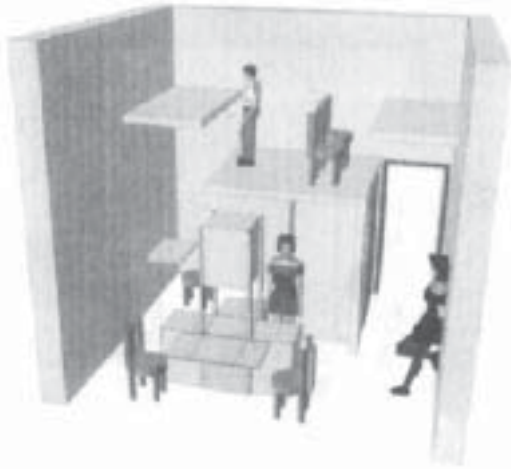
-This place will work also like community centres of promotion and development during flood-free seasons, being also able to function as a small scale accommodation venue for visitors and practitioners of the biorregional network.

**b) Training for the use of Communication Tools**

-The training for the handling of communication tools aimed at raising the social attention to the effects of floods and of the aggressive megaworks in the Río de La Plata basin, will make it possible for the people to begin those undertakings on the basis of the existing experience of their own knowledge and culture and of the product, based on the common interests, of the project interaction with other Río de la Plata basin networks. In this way, the role of the passive charity recipient will be transformed into the more active role as communicators of their own needs and strategies. We will encourage the idea that this role should be played by the community women since during the periods of isolation in which people suffer the effects of floods, survival hunting and fishing are the main male activities. The group of women will be trained in the use of



tools so that they –with creativity and innovation- can be the communicators of their situation, making it possible to guide the solidarity networks and government agencies towards their real needs, deriving from the situation. Those women, habitual weavers of crafwork, will be able to weave in the web their cooperation networks.



The provision of community access to training schemes will continue to enhance this participatory process and increase community empowerment and self determination

#### c) Installation of a host

-So that the Project AA community as well as the other active groups from the basin can have the possibility of access to communication for free, to interaction and to the transmission of thier activities.

#### d) Communication Center.

- Installation of the necessary hardware, software and wireless connective system for operating the Communication Center.

#### e) Communication Platform

- The reproduction of the register within the space and time fixed in the 2 stages, will be documented and supported by graphic and audiovisual materials, photographs, satellite images, and will be articulated with elements of daily culture, metaphors, interviews, oral and written production, the assessment of the objects that have taken part, the actions that day by day have defined transformation processes, and the emergent strategies of the process. Everything will be presented with the criterion of a sensitive map on the Web, designed to produce new forms of cooperation and approach for situations dealing with poverty and social exclusion and emerging from the uncoordinated forms of occupation encouraged by unilateral techno-political conceptions. This type of strategies will be included in regional and international discussion agendas.



# Extent at what the objectives have been reached as initially drawn up

## 1 STAGE



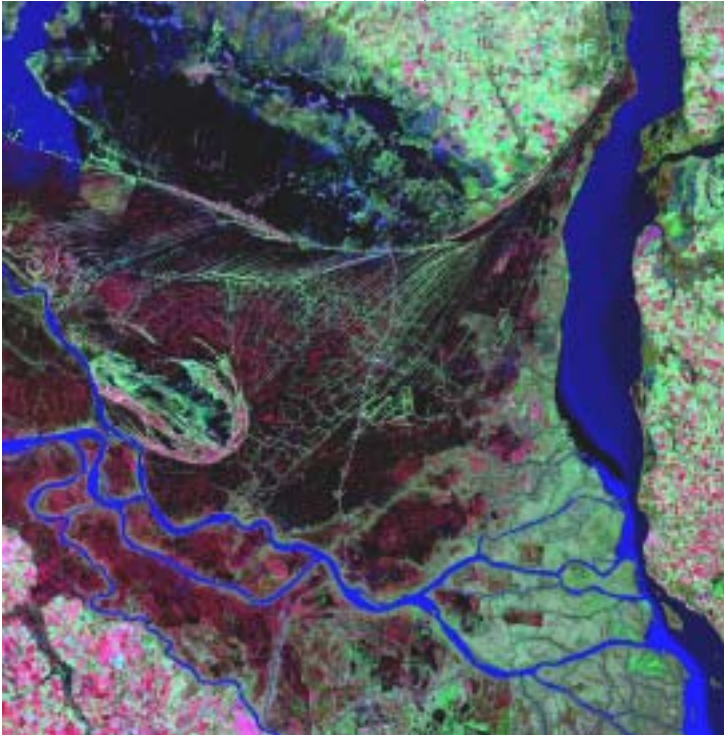
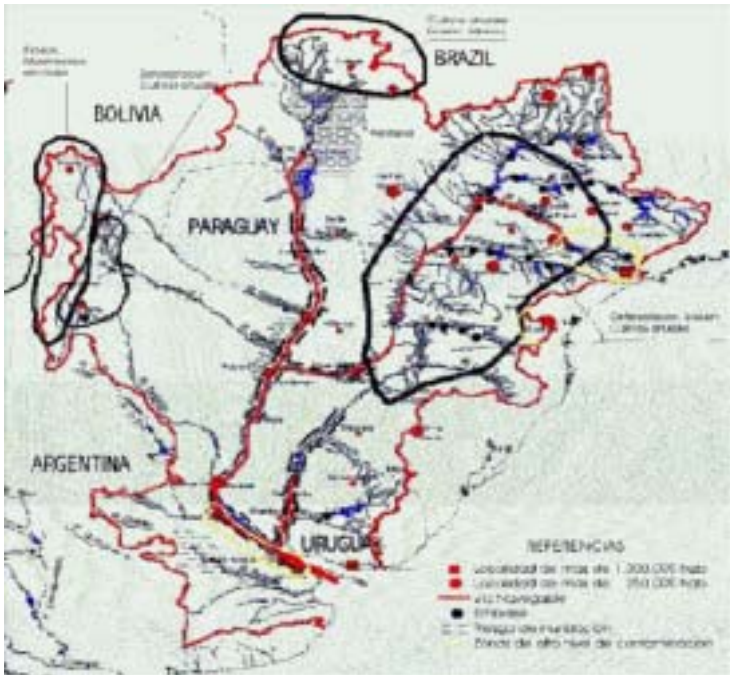
Since our first approach to the reality of the communities located between km 91 and 107 of the Delta of Campana, and within the framework of project AA we began our approach from 2 identified critical places with previous contact and knowledge. At the end of several visits, and based in the areas of school 25 and the Blondeau place, neighboring but whose main characteristic is to be waters above and down respectively of the railroad complex of Zarate-Brazo Largo, it was identified a group of both individually and institutionally worth actors for the proposal.

During this stage our work concentrated in the identification of actors and local multipliers through interviews and presentations using means such as photographs, video and graphical production, and through catalyzing a participative process.

Another objective reached in this stage has been the creation of ties, practices of mutual cooperation, and exchange activities between different actors and active regional groups which have experience in participative projects and integration in networks of the Delta and the Rio de La Plata, integrating this community to the current Biorregional Strategy. It has been expressed a genuine interest of participation in a long term with the characteristics of a sensitive exploration led by an artistic group.

# Geography, Cartography, Topography

It was organized a research task, compilation, elaboration and analysis of relevant maps and cartography such as: Extent of Del Plata river Basin, Hidrovia (Waterway) Hidroelectric Dam, System of Del Plata River Basin, Satellite image of the low Del Plata River Basin, "The Seventh Lagoon" detail, from "The Lagoon Cycle" by H.M. Harrison & N.Harrison



It was reviewed the photographic register of the great flood of 1998 organized in 5 thematic areas as follow:



Social /environmental context



School # 25, before, during and after the great flood



Architecture of the riverside in the area



Creative Solutions to deal with the floods



## Strategies of Survival



The purpose of this task is to prepare and develop a Memory Exercise with the identified and involved actors, as a tool to catalyze a creative process from the community that reflects a local vision about the situation's genealogy, and to stimulate the emergency of ideas and actions based on a common legacy of the area.

## Involved actors

Collaboration with Netverk Informatic Systems Company in the creation of a dynamic site designed not only to publish results, but to become a tool of connectivity for the involved communities, and to work as an exchange platform reaching different communities affected by mega-engineering in the Rio de La Plata River Basin.

Complex of timber production (mainly salicaceae) weinterested the Forest Development Project of the Secretariat of Agricultur, Breeding and Fishing of the Argentine Republic (SAGPyA/BIRF) Thy decided to collaborate helping to develop institutional and technological instruments to encourage productive diversification, with environmentally health criteria and a sustainable approach in the long term.

The members of the Health and Plants Network of Argentina, through one of its institutional members, The Albardón, experimental native species nursery, have compromised to develop dedicated community practices in which plants for the healthcare is crucial and research on the existence of an traditional knowledge associated to plants, together with the contribution of different immigrants communities. They also indicated the necessity and importance of diffusion and socialization of the traditional knowledge associated to plants and health, intended to improve the life standards of the Delta settler.

Also showed the intention to articulate the experiences with others similar in the Del Plata River Basin and to conform a coalition to promote actions that defend the life and the natural pulses of the potámic (fluvial)system: The Producers Cooperative of the Coast of Berisso and the Project of Local and Agroecological Development of the Faculty of Agricultural and Forest Sciences.



# Exercises of displacement



- Plants and health. Botanical research of the deltaic swamps and recognition of traditional and potential uses of local flora to help settlers to recover the local knowledge associated with plants; stimulating the formation of permanent working group about plants and health; developing medicinal gardens, productive pilot experiences for species growing.



- Willow: Identification of available land to generate production tests and to propose diversified uses as a means to stimulate a participative plan to recover and to transform areas.



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-Documentation and literary/historical register of this great area surrounded by myths and legend. labyrinth brooks formerly inhabited by Guaraní aboriginals from the immense bioregion of the Tupí-Guaraní. European immigration and the manipulation of the landscape.



- Sensitive recognition of the behavior of the nature, the times of swellings, the influence of the moon, the times of pruning, the flowering seasons, the fishing. oriented to survival using the immediate resources.



-Identification of practice spaces. Community centre of the Blondau. To this place people arrive from different and recondite places. They inhabit inhospitable zones and tie to each other becoming involved in projects of local development and good practices.



-Search of communication points. The passenger boats are the site where the news and the ideas are communicated, and of course the days of meeting are the Religious Celebrations and the Production Exhibitions. Then the exchanges take place and soon the information is distributed between the families.

## Results:

- Cartography, documentation, and elaborated registry of the situation.
- Group of collaborators identified .
- Integration of the project to the active regional networks.
- Relationship in the community fortified
- Documentation of the process



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