

Developing Sustainable Economies Utilizing Local Resources in Distressed Neighborhoods

Introduction

Virtually every metropolitan city in the United States experiences decline in neighborhoods and concentration of poverty. Since the 1960s urban areas have undergone many changes linked to negative shifts in the economy that lead to an inner-city crisis of concentrated poverty, racial segregation, low socioeconomic status, decay, abandonment and individuals with little mobility (Wilson 1994; Wilson 1996). Concentration of poverty comes with high unemployment rates and disinvestment in inner-cities that is exacerbated by racial tensions and fear of the city, evident by the number of individuals with decent-paying jobs and higher family incomes that moved away from the city-center into suburbs and urban fringe neighborhoods (Wilson 1994; Harvey 1989; Drier et al. 2001). The result is an urban core densely occupied with residents of the lowest median income in the city, high minority populations, and people without higher education (Wilson 1996). These poor urban neighborhoods are distressed in terms of resident socioeconomic status (SES) and often come with decayed and abandoned buildings and high vacancy rates.

These issues are of importance in the Urban Studies field because they are present in so many declining metropolitan and central-cities in the US (Drier et al. 2001). Distressed neighborhoods have been the target of government policies and community development strategies that work to renew neighborhoods since the 1960s (Lamore et al. 2006). Each program varies in their goal(s) and intended results, as well as the methods to reach those

goals. In this paper I present the argument that distressed neighborhoods can renew and rebuild from within utilizing often overlooked land, money, and labor that is already present. I argue that using present resources is essential to building a truly sustainable local economy, and that these resources can be identified as assets for growth only when one looks critically at the culture and identity of a neighborhood.

This paper begins with a discussion of how neighborhoods become distressed and what the term “distressed” means. It will then look at past renewal policies that have been formed and implemented without looking at the culture and demographics of a population first; a step that I argue is necessary in order to make better economic development decisions. I will also look at policies that have worked to renew an area utilizing outside resources and how these programs have failed to create sustainable local economies. The purpose of this paper is to find ways to create an economy of place that does not rely on outside resources, because this is what makes an economy truly sustainable.

How Neighborhoods Become Distressed

Historically in the US, inner-city decline is linked to deindustrialization of an area. The Fordist era of standardized mass production lasted from the 1920s into the 1960s, and over the course of this time industry and residences that were concentrated in the late 1800s slowly became decentralized. By 1970 commercial activity had become decentralized as well, widening the spatial gap between people and employment. The combined forces of decentralized jobs and increased automobile use brought about massive suburbanization in the US. Jobs were relocating outside of the city and people with mobility and a decent living-wage

migrated out of the city and into the suburbs for cheaper land and bigger houses (Wilson 1994; Drier et al. 2001). By the end of the 1970s many inner-cities were concentrated with poverty, unemployment, crime, lower life expectancy, and teenage pregnancy (Hannigan 1998). These urban issues were more reason for those with mobility to move out of the city and into the suburbs. Inner-cities in crisis experienced disinvesting in infrastructure and services, which were evident in reductions in federal support, deteriorating urban infrastructure, and various government policies that did not properly address inner-city problems (Harvey 1989).

Racial tensions and discrimination are two major contributors to inner-city poverty. William Julius Wilson has pinpointed minority population as a characteristic of poor, urban neighborhoods. His argument is grounded in demographic data showing an increase of inner-city poverty and racial segregation from the late 1950s through the 1990s (Wilson 1996). Racism has undeniably been a part of America's past culture based on the country's history. However, some argue that despite abolishment of Jim Crow laws and legally-unacceptable racism against African-Americans, racism is still evident at the institutional and structural level (Lawrence 2001). Lawrence argues that American culture in politics, economics, and social structure continues to re-create white privilege, as evident by persistent racial outcomes of policies and programs that continually leave racial groups in a disadvantaged position with low employment, education, income and more (2001). Wilson notes that Black communities have historically been segregated from economic, social and political activities, and that this segregation has isolated blighted, minority communities (Wilson 1996). Poor communities continue to be increasingly segregated and concentrated in poverty as opportunities for employment are outside of the city and few individuals have access to those jobs. People with

mobility leave poor communities to find jobs elsewhere, and along with their mobility they take income and economic tax base away from the inner-city (Wilson 1996).

As people in the middle- and upper-class moved out of the city, economic inequalities became geographically and spatially apparent. The suburbs had a bigger tax base and gained traction in local autonomy giving them the ability to address issues within their neighborhood, meanwhile the inner-city remained in poor condition. Dreier, Mollenkopf and Swanstrom argue that this geographic spread of income inequalities, or economic segregation, is not simply the result of economic shifts in growth, but rather are a result of government interventions and lack thereof (Drier et al. 2001). The Urban Renewal program, which will be discussed later in this paper, is one example of government action that led to further economic inequality in the city. On the other hand, government de-regulation led to bank practices such as redlining that geographically reinforced economic segregation. Lack of federal policy to addresses issues in the inner-city such as poor housing, poverty, education, and public transportation encourages those with mobility to go to the suburbs, furthering economic segregation and concentrated poverty (Dreier et al. 2001).

Some argue that suburbanization happened because the market shifted from clustered industry to more technology, and when combined with increased car use and a new network of freeways and highways, migrating out of the city was the next logical step (Drier et al 2001; Jackson 1985). Alonso's Free Market Explanation of Suburbanization says that moving to the suburbs is a free choice that individuals make based on their income, and that more affluent people prefer to accept long commutes for cheap land and bigger homes in the suburbs, while the poor prefer living close to their home (Alonso in Drier et al. 2001). However, others argue

that government policies promote economic segregation and suburban sprawl. One example of government promotion of suburban sprawl is increased local autonomy granted to suburbs as they became more densely-populated (Drier et al. 2001). Other examples of encouraged suburban sprawl are deregulation of banks, which led to redlining and economic segregation, and suburban zoning regulations that excluded apartments and affordable housing from being built in the suburbs (Dreier 1991; Dreier et al. 2001).

Fischel also argues that suburbanization is not completely market-driven and inevitable. He estimated that 75% of forces driving suburbanization were advances in transportation, technology, and income, which leaves 25% of suburbanization caused by nonmarket forces¹. Nonmarket forces include social and economic reasons for those with mobility to leave the central city. Several studies show that distressed neighborhoods can induce fear of crime, anxiety, and general discomfort in being associated with poverty, poor socioeconomic status, or decaying neighborhoods (Latkin et al. 2003; Weich and Lewis 1998, Adler and Snibbe 2003). Households try to escape the poor conditions of the inner-city poor which further concentrate poverty and individuals with little mobility, while exacerbating economic segregation.

After World War Two in the 1960s government implemented policy programs that were geared toward urban decline, such as urban renewal, revenue sharing, and HUD programs. Many of these policies and programs were flawed either in the planning process, implementation, or results, which will be discussed later in this paper. Dreier argues that the targets for many policies that claimed to be for the inner-city were actually for central business

¹ William Fischel, "Does the American Way of Zoning", p. 161, in Drier et al. 2001

districts, not residents of poor neighborhoods (Dreier et al. 2001). Jacoby and Siegel agree that policies do not target root causes or conditions of the inner-city that must be understood in order to successfully implement economic growth policies (Jacoby and Siegel 1999). Jacoby and Siegel's argument brings up the point that not only should city policies work to bring business into the inner-city, but that policies are also discouraging innovation and economic growth that can come from within. This reinforces the argument that there are untapped assets within distressed communities that could be utilized for growth, in this case it is an unemployed workforce.

A fundamental reason for disinvesting in the inner-city and giving subsidies to suburban developments is the practice of redlining. Redlining is a lending practice that banks adopted when reductions in federal support and bank regulations came in the 1970s and 1980s (Harvey 1989; Dreier 1991). Poor and minority urban neighborhoods were literally marked on a map with a red boundary line that kept investment and lending away from these neighborhoods. This is the meaning of disinvestment in the city. Lack of federal funding forced cities and communities to seek private financing, but with discriminatory lending practices happening there was no funding so the inner-city deteriorated while those with mobility and capital fled (Dreier 1991; Harvey 1989).

While there are several debates about the reasons for inner-city decline that still continue today, there is no doubt that outmigration and suburbanization are forces that spark decline. One can look at the income levels in a city and see that the median income rises as you move further away from the city center (Drier et al. 2001). With disinvestment in the city and/or investment only happening outside of the city, individuals in low SES areas continue to

become more concentrated in an area due to unemployment and inability to access jobs that are outside of their neighborhood (Wilson 1994). Suburban sprawl has created distressed neighborhoods that are declining more into low-income communities with little resources (Steuteville 2004).

What is a Distressed Neighborhood?

There are several characteristics of a distressed neighborhood, many of which are debatable and are unique to each neighborhood. Some key characteristics are few resources, poor housing, high unemployment, lack of employment opportunities, high vacancy rates, and residents have the lowest median incomes in the city (Wilson 1994; Drier et al. 2001; Adler and Snibbe 2003). Concentrated poverty is a problem that's seen mainly in central cities and metropolitan areas (Drier et al. 2001). As mentioned earlier, historically in the US many neighborhoods begin to decline when the economy of the area declined, which primarily was the case with deindustrialization in the 1960s and 1970s.

Socioeconomic status is another way to evaluate the condition of a neighborhood and its residents. Socioeconomic status (SES) is a term that reflects an individual's social position based on a number of factors besides poverty or income (Adler and Snibbe 2003). There is no standard for what other factors are used to determine SES, so one can choose what variables they want to collect data on to determine SES for their study. One study may collect data on vacancy rates, home foreclosure rates, and income levels of a neighborhood, while another study collects unemployment, education, and homeownership rates. For this project I created an index of socio-economic status (SES) in the city of Tacoma based on eight variables: poverty,

unemployment, race, education (high school diploma attainment rate), linguistic isolation (non-English speaking residents/households), single-parent households, and plumbing and kitchen facilities.

Finally, a neighborhood's physical condition is another indicator of its health. The physical state of a neighborhood and its infrastructure is rated by outside observers, serving as an indicator of distress, social disorganization, and poverty (Latkin et al. 2003). The perception of one's environment is also formed in-part by physical characteristics, which inscribe identity upon a place (Adler 2003). Distressed neighborhoods often have many vacancies with decaying and abandoned buildings, which signify to outsiders and residents that a neighborhood is in decline and an undesirable place to be. Graffiti can also serve as an indicator of a distressed neighborhood that experiences high crime, gang violence, and illegal activities (Davila 2004). These negative physical indicators best align with Wilson and Kelling's "Broken Windows" social theory, which uses the metaphor of a broken window of a house being a sign of neglect and deterioration (Wilson and Kelling 1982).

Past Models of Renewal and Revitalization

Having explored the various explanations for inner-city decline above, this paper will now discuss solutions for what to do with distressed neighborhoods. Government regulation is a topic that comes up often as a contributor to inner-city decline. Whether one feels that regulation is a contributor, or lack of regulation is, scholars from both sides argue that government policies can counter economic segregation, concentrated distressed neighborhoods, and suburban sprawl (Dreier et al. 2001). This paper will now discuss models

for revitalization and renewal of distressed neighborhoods that are based on explanations for decline, and have different intended goals and results.

A revitalization program that targeted housing in declining neighborhoods was Urban Renewal, which was implemented by the Housing Act of 1949 (Levy 2006). The program relocated residents that lived in decaying buildings to other parts of the city while their homes were demolished and rebuilt. The program worked to revitalize neighborhoods by reducing economic segregation, demolishing substandard housing, and constructing better housing for residents of the urban core. The intended results of the program were to renew poor neighborhoods and provide good, affordable housing for the poor while also sparking economic growth and stability. The results, however, did not turn out as intended. In the process of demolishing old housing and constructing new, current residents lost their housing, connections with neighbors, friends, and businesses. Upon completion of new housing it was often more expensive and did not suit the needs of residents. The renewal process also contributed to decline in the local economy because investors in the area would freeze their funds to avoid investing in risky renovations, and local businesses would have no choice but to shut down during renovations because there were no people to serve (Levy 2006). The Urban Renewal program failed to stimulate growth in a strong local economy, although it did spark competition with suburbs in some cases, but the program officially ended in 1973. While this program targeted housing several other programs target economic growth and revitalization in declining neighborhoods.

Many economic development models focus on drawing corporations and businesses into distressed neighborhoods in order to improve economic conditions. Hubbard and Hall

suggest a strategy of fostering urban entrepreneurialism within a city in order to attract corporations, businesses, and future sources of employment for residents (Hubbard and Hall 1998). Hubbard and Hall argue that their model for an entrepreneurial city can be sustainable at the local level if urban strategies and policies are formed with a focus on "innovation that maximizes human capacities rather than private profit" (Hubbard and Hall, 1998, p. 98). They advocate offering financial incentives for corporations to locate in the city, as well as investing more in the private sector in order to encourage innovation. Innovation from a community is a good way to tap into resources that are present, but attracting outside corporations can leave a city vulnerable to decentralization of those corporations.

Jacoby and Siegel also advocate incentivizing businesses to locate in the inner-city through tax breaks, loans, and grants given to community-based organizations (CBO's). They argue for incentivizing businesses through these methods because tax breaks can offer flexibility to individual business owners, which in turn creates more opportunity for entrepreneurs in the inner-city (Jacoby and Siegel 1999). Some have suggested regulating banks to lend in certain areas, but Jacoby and Siegel oppose this because it will "inevitably backfire" because bureaucratic regulation does not understand how the local and private markets work (Jacoby and Siegel 1999). Their proposed solution is that grants be given to community-based organizations (CBO's) that can use the grants to bring commercial activity and social services to the area.

In contrast to the above economic approaches to revitalization, some argue for more market-based approaches to neoliberalism that encourage competition and globalization. Peck and Tickell's analysis says that neoliberalism entails political restructuring, downsizing of

national and state regulations, and social welfare concerns being placed at a lower priority than immediate economic growth (2002). Peck and Tickell argue against neoliberal regimes because investments are continually targeted to cities based on their competitive advantage and economic potential, rather than targeting funds to distressed areas that have many needs and are economically segregated. They say that “in its roll-out guise neoliberalism is increasingly penetrating these very places, animated by a set of concerns related to crime, worklessness, welfare dependency, and social breakdown” (Peck and Tickell 2002, p. 394). To sum up, neoliberal approaches to economic growth do not encourage sustainable local economies, but rather encourage political fragmentation, economic segregation and suburban sprawl (Harvey 2005; Drier et al. 2001).

Analysis of Development Models

Dreier articulates the options of community revitalization well, saying that “they can reduce the incidence of poverty either by lifting up the poor people in the city or by enticing more affluent people to move in, [but] they cannot require the suburbs to build affordable housing for the central-city poor. Nor can they require suburban employers to hire poor city residents...” (Dreier et al. 2001, p.135). This reinforces the argument that poor urban neighborhoods ought to be revitalized from within. Jacoby and Siegel’s argument that bureaucratic regulation does not understand how the local and private markets work (1999) indicates that the culture and economy of a place must also be understood before successfully designing and implementing a revitalization program.

One must consider the culture and demographics of an area in order to make better informed decisions of how to renew and develop an area in a sustainable way. "Most cities focus on attracting new investments in the hope that expanding tax revenues will fund programs to help lift up city residents. Instead of putting a high priority on antipoverty policies, they focus on attracting private investment and improving municipal service." (Dreier et al. 1991, p.135). Hubbard and Hall touch on the importance of understanding the culture and identity of a place when they say that urban policies for entrepreneurial cities must be tailored to each city (1998). However their advocacy of attracting corporations into a city do not align with building a sustainable local economy because corporations leave a city dependent on outside resources, thus more vulnerable to economic instability (Shuman 1998). Local sustainable economic development is the answer to successful revitalization of a distressed community. The concept of economic sustainability at the local level means that a community can be revitalized using resources from within, and can continue to self-sustain its residents without relying on outside resources. Community-based efforts are the best way to foster local economies because it keeps investments and benefits in the community, while considering its identity and culture.

Local Economic Sustainability and Revitalization

Sustainability in general is a term used when planning development(s) that have long-term goals and benefits. Wheeler works with the Brundtland Commission's definition of sustainability as developing for the present without compromising future generations' ability to sustain themselves, and he defines sustainability in a metropolitan context. Wheeler's

definition of sustainable development in an urban setting is planning for a community's long-term well-being by addressing the inherently interwoven issues of transportation, economics, housing, community development, environment, and more (Wheeler 1998). This paper focuses on economic sustainability because a community's ability to be self-reliant is necessary for a thriving local economy. A successful economy at the local level does not just mean profits, but also the ability to provide access to resources, goods and services to its residents without depending on other economies (Shuman 1998).

This paper argues that economies be revitalized and renewed at the local level in order to successfully renew a community. In this paper the term "local" is defined as a community that uses local labor, land and capital to produce basic needs for itself (Shuman 1998). Shuman argues that such an economy can be profitable while efficiently consuming, producing, and distributing goods and services within the community. A place-based economy can strengthen a community by making it self-reliant and minimizing its dependence on others to solve problems associated with decline, such as education, health, safety, and employment (Shuman 1998). Self-reliance is also favorable for communities because it minimizes the chances of the economy failing due to corporations closing or relocating. Community corporations are one solution to avoiding the risk of decentralization of jobs.

Community corporations are enterprises that are owned by citizens of a community, and the corporation focuses on making and/or delivering goods and services to be consumed locally, hire locally, and use local resources for production (Shuman 1998). The most common corporate structure is owners living far from businesses, often outside of the neighborhood where the business is located, sometimes even out of the city or state. Shuman argues that this

corporate structure is the least beneficial to a community because the money spent and earned in this business does not stay in the community, and the local economy relies on outside sources of stability (Shuman 1998). Community corporations also reduce the risk of another decentralization of employment opportunities because a corporation/business is less likely to relocate somewhere else when it is in a symbiotic relationship with the community. If the community can sustain itself through employment in community corporations and affordable goods and services, then the corporations will succeed because they are providing affordable goods and services to their community.

Comprehensive Community Initiatives (CCI's) are another example of economic revitalization that focused on understanding the conditions of a community to solve urban blight. CCI's were a set of initiatives launched in the 1980s that worked to "develop capacity in distressed neighborhoods....[and seek] to improve the quality of life" for residents in distressed communities" (Kubich and Stone 2001, p. 15). CCI's work to solve urban blight by understanding issues such as crime, health, infrastructure, racism, and more that are all interrelated. CCI's use a more social science approach in thinking about what conditions bring about urban blight and how changes can occur, and this kind of critical thinking is what is needed at the local level in order to stimulate economic prosperity.

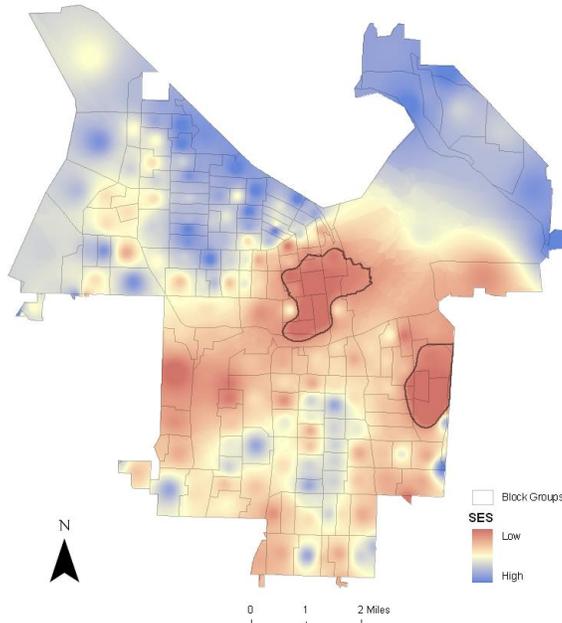
Community-based approaches to economic development focus on keeping development and investments in the community in order to better suit the needs of a neighborhood. They also focus on understanding the conditions, culture, and identity of a place when forming policy. Community Corporations "have a greater incentive to make decisions responsible to their neighbors' needs" (Shuman 1998, p. 101). Community-based approaches

to economic revitalization are ideal for creating policies and programs that can identify under-utilized assets in a community because they understand the community they are trying to rebuild.

Renewing Distressed Neighborhoods in Tacoma, WA

Using the index of socio-economic status (SES) I created for the city of Tacoma, I put the SES index into a GIS I created in ArcInfo software and created a visual geography of Tacoma's SES. This process enabled me to identify the boundaries of two neighborhoods in Tacoma with the lowest SES: Salishan and Hilltop.

Socio-economic Status in Tacoma by Census 2000 Block Groups



This map is a visualization of Tacoma's SES based on the index I created. The two neighborhoods of concentrated low SES are outlined with a black border. These two neighborhoods were later used in a parcel analysis.

The lowest SES in Tacoma represents a combination of high poverty and unemployment, more ethnic and minority residents including immigrants who may not speak English, low educational attainment, single-parent families, and more houses without plumbing and/or kitchen facilities. I also analyzed the physical geography of these neighborhoods by doing a parcel analysis of each. Again I used GIS to analyze parcel data and find vacant and/or under-utilized commercial and industrial parcels in each neighborhood. My analysis findings were that the Hilltop neighborhood has several vacant industrial and commercial parcels, while Salishan had only a few parcels in the neighborhood that were zoned for industrial use and a handful more on the fringe of the neighborhood were zoned for industrial or commercial use but were being used otherwise.

Biking



This is a parcel analysis of the Hilltop neighborhood. The dark purple shape represents how far an individual can walk from their neighborhood in 10 minutes. Within this walking distance I then highlighted vacant commercial and industrial parcels that could be targeted for future businesses to locate and bring economic growth to this distressed neighborhood.

Tacoma's two neighborhoods have high unemployment rates, low poverty, and a number of vacant or under-utilized parcels. These two traits can be used together to spark some local economic development. These parcels could be re-purposed and developed into employment opportunities for residents. I designed this project to promote job development within a distressed neighborhood in order to revitalize the economy, not developing outside of the neighborhood. This analysis has been done in an effort to address unemployment for residents of low SES by finding access to jobs that do not require long-distance commuting.

Based on the discussion above one can see that there are untapped resources in these two Tacoma communities that can be utilized to bring about economic growth. The index of socio-economic status that I created is meant to provide policy-makers with information about the culture and economy of each neighborhood at a very fine scale. Census block groups are one of the finest measurements of demographics one can obtain on a place. My parcel analysis highlights land that is vacant in each distressed neighborhood in order to point out that there are resources in a neighborhood that can be identified as assets. Utilizing already available land promotes efficiency and self-reliance in a community, and creating jobs within or adjacent to a distressed neighborhood allows residents to easily access employment opportunities that do not require commutes (Shuman 1998). Another benefit to creating local jobs for distressed neighborhoods is that the money will most likely be used in that local economy (Shuman 1998; Murphy and Cunningham 2003; Lamore et al. 2006). If people live and work in the same area, they will most likely shop in the same place if the opportunity is there, thus creating jobs within resident neighborhoods can increase commercial and economic success of a local economy

(Kelly 2004). Overall, finding job opportunities within a distressed neighborhood can increase an individual's SES and help build a strong, sustainable economy at the local level.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Using present resources is essential to building a sustainable local economy. Resources can be identified as assets for growth only when one looks critically at the culture and identity of a neighborhood. I agree with the argument that government policies can counter economic segregation, concentrated distressed neighborhoods, and suburban sprawl (Dreier et al. 2001). Community Corporations and Comprehensive Community Initiatives are some examples of successful economic revitalization from a community-based approach. Renewing a community is a process that must start from inside a neighborhood in order to be successful. Design of economic revitalization policies must include considerations of the needs, conditions, and identity of a neighborhood in order to be successful. Sustainable growth must come from within utilizing assets of land, money and labor that are present in a community in order to create a sustainable local economy. Local culture is a key component in designing successful revitalization programs, and each distressed neighborhood must have policies tailored to their specific needs. In order to understand the culture and identity of a place, policymakers must find ways to interact with the community and understand how the community organizes itself from the perspective of residents.

In the case of Tacoma's two distressed communities, I recommend that vacant lots and an unemployed workforce present in Hilltop and Salishan be utilized to renew each neighborhood's economy. I also recommend that policymakers take the time to gather information on the culture of the community. Whether it be interacting with the community,

gathering surveys, or working with community-based organizations, it is important to work with residents to understand what it is they need. Working with residents will also provide the opportunity for policymakers to find out what are considered community assets to residents. Learning the assets and needs of the community from a resident's perspective is the best way to find out what is being under-utilized in an area that appears to have no resources from an outsider's perspective.

This project is intended to be used by transportation planning, housing authorities, economic development planning, community development, and unemployment offices in the city of Tacoma. My project is relevant to these audiences and utilized as a resource for determining what areas in Tacoma are in need of economic development. I am taking this resource a step further by then pinpointing future development sites based on vacant and under-utilized parcels being in or near areas of low SES.

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