

# Cohousing in Sweden, history and present situation

(as of March 2014)

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## Introduction

Based on current research 'cohousing' is defined as housing with common spaces and shared facilities (Vestbro, 2010). In the present essay the focus is on projects where each household has its own private apartment. Projects where a smaller group of people share a villa or larger apartment – usually called *communes* – are not discussed, although they belong to the family of cohousing. Eco-villages are also excluded. In Sweden the eco-villages (about 30-40 units, <http://ekobyar.se/ekobyar/>) do not consider themselves to be part of the cohousing typology. Lastly, housing for special categories such as students and persons with disabilities are excluded, although they often fulfil the definition of cohousing.

In Sweden, the word *kollektivhus* (literally 'collective building') is the most frequently used term for housing with shared facilities. Originally it referred to the collective *organisation* of housing, but not to neighbourly collaboration or to sense of community. When the term was launched in the 1930s, the aim was to reduce women's housework in order for them to be able to retain gainful employment even when they married and had children.

## Early modernist examples

The first modernist collective house in Sweden was built in 1935 at John Ericssonsgatan in Stockholm. It was designed by architect Sven Markelius, who lived there himself for many years. The kindergarten, established according to social reformer Alva Myrdal's concepts, was the first one in Sweden where modern educational methods were applied.



*The first collective residential building in Sweden, built 1935 in John Ericssonsgatan 6 in Stockholm. Note the food lifts in the four corners of the corridor, the kindergarten to the left in the plan of the ground floor and the restaurant to the right.*

The ideal of rational living led to the construction of food lifts providing meals from a central kitchen to the individual apartments. Another aspect of this is the layout of the flats, which were designed according to the idea of minimum requirements. Despite the small apartment sizes the John Ericssonsgatan unit did not attract working class households. Progressive middle-class intellectuals were the majority of those who came to live in this building (Waagensen & Rubin, 1949; Caldenby & Walldén, 1979).

The first collective housing units of Sweden were based not on cooperation between the tenants, but on the division of labour. The tenants were to be served by employed staff, even for laundry and room cleaning. The tenants themselves were not supposed to do any house work. This probably con-

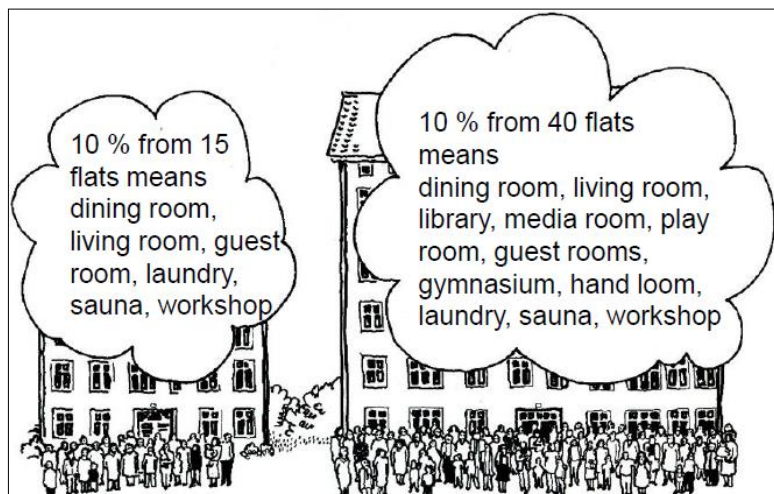
tributed to the labelling of collective housing as a "*special solution for privileged people*". Thus, it was considered impossible for the labour party in power to provide subsidies to collective housing (Vestbro, 1982).

The John Ericssonsgatan project was followed by other cohouses based on services through employed staff. One of them was Hässelby Family Hotel, built in the middle of the 1950s. It consists of 328 apartments, all connected through indoor communication and with common facilities such as a restaurant, a cafeteria, a big party room, a day-care centre for children, a gym hall, a small shop, a reception, a hair-dresser, a laundry and a meditation room (Vestbro, 1982; Blomberg et al, 1986).

In 1969 the owner of the family hotel started to close down the common services. A group of active residents objected, but after several years of struggle they lost the battle about the meal service. The restaurant was closed. In this situation the activists started to cook for themselves in the restaurant kitchen. They found this work attractive. Subsequently, the purchase of food, division into cooking teams and the selling of meal tickets were organised on a long-term basis among those who participated in the new activity (Vestbro, 1982; Blomberg et al, 1986). The self-work model was born.

### Invention of the self-work model

By this time arguments for the self-work model had already been presented by a group of professional women called Bo i Gemenskap (BiG, 'Live in community'). The group did not agree with the modernists that housework should be minimized. Instead, it maintained that housework was a responsibility for everyone, men as well as women, and should be regarded as a valuable contribution to society. They argued that the traditional housework tended to be cumbersome because it had to be done on a daily basis by each individual household. BiG stated that cooking and child rearing together with others would make the duties enjoyable and better for children. This would also save time. Between 15 and 50 households was considered to be an optimal size for the new type of cohousing. If all households accept a reduction of the apartment space with ten percent, the common area would be sufficient for communal activities, and costs would remain the same (Berg et al, 1982).



*The sketch shows how much of common spaces that residents in cohousing can acquire if they abstain from only 10 per cent of normal private apartment space.*

The BIG group could have chosen to implement its ideas in a single project suited to the needs of its own members. However, it considered its model to be an asset to other social groups and therefore proposed that municipal housing companies should take the lead. Around 1980 the time was ripe for concrete application of the BiG model.

In the 1960s many married women in Sweden began to work outside the home. They wanted kindergartens and other forms of services. Almost all the women's organisations in Sweden demanded that cohousing be built (Woodward, Vestbro & Grossman, 1989).

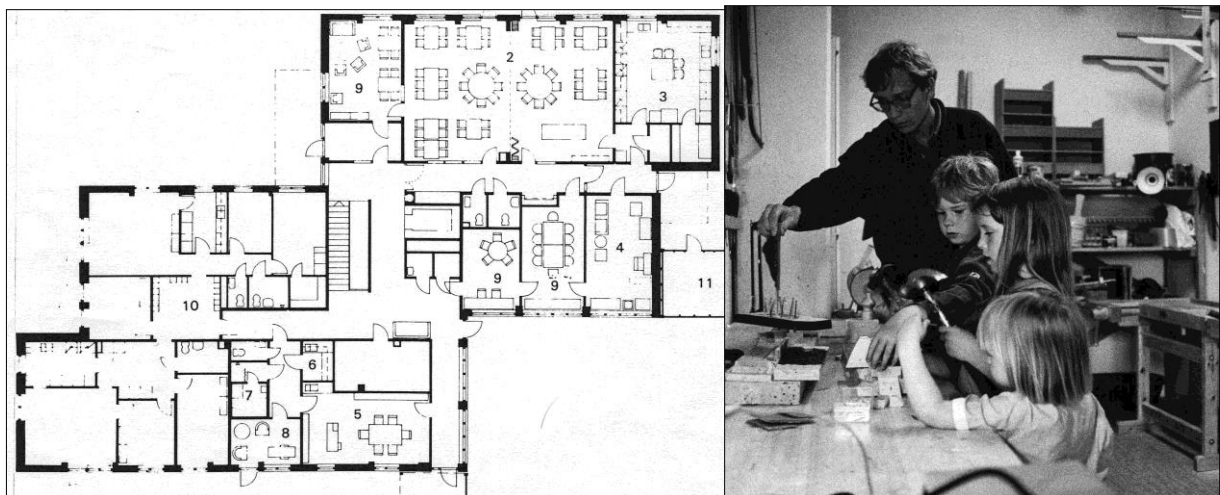
During the 1970s the idea of communal living developed explosively when young people started to live in smaller communes in Berlin, Boston, Copenhagen, Stockholm and other university cities of industrialized countries. This alternative living movement challenged the nuclear family ideal. The media presented the new alternative households as bohemian and promiscuous. However, while official society deplored the communal way of life, others saw the advantages of sharing household work and letting both men and women share the responsibility for housekeeping and child care (Vestbro, 1982).

It was some of the previously hostile municipal housing companies (now under new leadership) that implemented most of the new experiments. This type of support is almost unique for Sweden, comparable only with the Netherlands and to some extent with Denmark. In other countries cohousing are usually the result of the active group acting as the developer itself.

The first example of the new model was *Stacken*, built in Bergsjön, Gothenburg in 1979. In this low-status area quite a few apartments were empty because of the housing crisis. Therefore the responsible municipal housing company accepted an experiment when the architect, professor Lars Ågren, asked if he could turn one of the ten-storey tower blocks into a cohousing unit.

*The cohousing Stacken in Göteborg, built in 1979, became Sweden's first collective house of the self-work model.*

Tenants for Stacken were recruited through advertising and had their apartments tailored to their own taste as the block was rebuilt. A central kitchen, a dining room and a nursery for children were arranged on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor, showing that communal facilities were for tenants, but not for outsiders. The inhabitants formed a new type of administrative set-up in order to get full control of maintenance, recruitment of tenants and use of communal rooms. Studies showed that Stacken attracted people who wanted to fulfil their innermost dreams in this housing experiment. This also meant that they at the start had conflicts over issues such as use of tobacco and alcoholic beverages, child rearing and internal democracy (Caldenby and Walldén, 1984). Many households left the project because of the conflicts, and over time fewer households took part in communal activities. 25 years later Stacken came to life again, taken over by younger people who bought the building and started a process of substantial refurbishment.



Left: Ground floor of *Prästgårdshagen*, built in 1983 by the municipal housing company *Familjebo-städer*. Legend: 2. Dining room, 3. Kitchen, 4. Laundry, 5. Ceramics workshop, 6. Photo lab, 7. Sauna, 8. Relax room, 9. Common spaces such as children's play room, workshop, office (later TV room), 10. Daycare centre (run by the municipality), 11. Storage. Right: the carpentry.

Another example of the new model is *Prästgårdshagen* in southern Stockholm. Inhabitants were recruited through a special waiting list run by the municipal authority in charge of allocation of rental accommodation. The unit was a new construction, and tenants were recruited early enough to be able



New tenants to Prästgårdshagen are, when they sign the tenancy contract, requested to join the co-housing association of the unit, and also to agree to do compulsory work such as cooking or house cleaning. Usually each individual adult cooks in a team of two once every second week. Such a task takes about three hours, and requires that the person in charge is able to leave his/her job about 3 p.m. that day. Tenants have also taken over maintenance tasks such as the cleaning of communal rooms, gardening and lawn cutting, snow-clearance and minor repairs. In this way they have managed to reduce their housing costs and to make new investments in communal facilities.

## The Linköping project

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In all, around 50 cohouses were built in Sweden during the 1980s. A dozen of them were later ‘decollectivized’, mainly due to the attempt to combine cohousing for young families with service housing for pensioners who were too dependent on care to be able to benefit from inter-generational integration (Woodward, Vestbro & Grossmann, 1989).

While cohousing development in general declined in Sweden, yet another model appeared, namely the one called “second half of life”, for people 40 and above without children at home. The idea was elaborated and concretized by a group of seniors who started this work in 1987. They were concerned about their living conditions as they grew older and decided to develop a model where middle-aged and elderly people should help each other socially, get a better quality of life and be less dependent on municipal services.

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ted in the design process, which meant that they were able to tailor apartments to their own wishes, something which was new in Swedish planning practice.



*Ground floor of Färdknäppen.*

The building is an apartment block with two stairwells in four and seven floors respectively. It consists of 43 apartments, in size from 38 to 74 sqm. All are provided with a kitchen. The common spaces (in total amounting to 345 sqm) consist of a central kitchen, a dining room, a living room, a weaving room, a hobby room, a workshop, a gym, a sauna, three guest rooms, and two rooms with computers.



*Dining room of Färdknäppen.*

A special agreement with the housing company stipulates that the cohousing association manages the common spaces and is in charge of certain maintenance tasks. Persons with disabilities get support in their homes from the municipality and county council, while the cohousing members often provide human support to their neighbours in ways that do

not exist in conventional housing. Working groups are in charge of care of common spaces and for gardening. Other voluntary groups are for the local choir, the library, parties and entertainment, physical exercises and much more (id 22, 2012; [http://www.fardknappen.se/In\\_English.html](http://www.fardknappen.se/In_English.html)).

## Overview of the present situation

At present (2014) there are 43 functioning cohousing units in Sweden. Of these, 26 function as originally planned, while 17 have reduced services. Smaller communes, eco-villages and production collective are not included in these numbers. Of the 43 cohousing units, eight are for the second half of life, two are converted from the old model based on services with employed staff, four are combined with municipal services and one may be considered an eco-village. Ten consist of old buildings that have been rebuilt while 33 are new constructions. The 43 projects comprise altogether about 2000 apartments, which is equivalent to 0.05 per cent of the total housing stock in Sweden. More information about these projects can be found on the website of Kollektivhus NU [www.kollektivhus.nu](http://www.kollektivhus.nu).

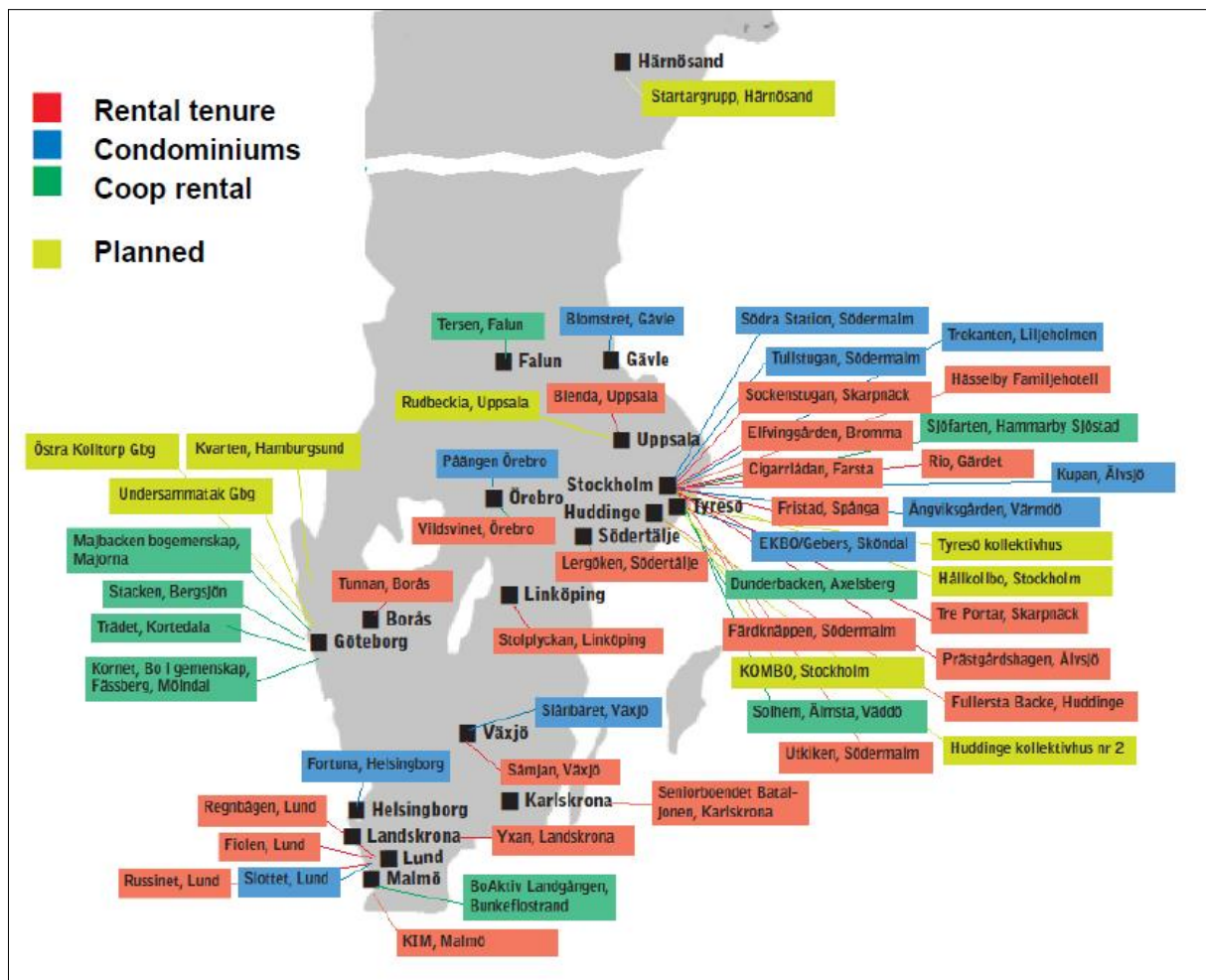
Originally the vast majority of projects were owned by public housing companies. During the last decade and a half, public rental housing complexes have been converted into condominium type of ownership, following neo-liberal agendas. This means that it has become more difficult to secure participation in common activities. However, most of the projects with converted ownership have survived as cohousing.

The overview in the figure below shows that 23 units have rental tenure, while 11 are condominiums and 8 have cooperative rental tenure (a form that gives the cohousing association a strong influence). Virtually all projects are urban multi-household developments. Only three may be considered to be rural or semi-rural.

The national association for cohousing, Kollektivhus NU, does not only have existing cohousing units as members, but also starter groups, i.e. groups striving to get cohousing for themselves. Altogether



ther 14 such groups are members. In the map, nine of them are shown on the basis that they are negotiating land allocation with the respective municipalities and have started the design process.



*Map of existing Swedish cohouses and groups on their way to get land for building. The situation in March 2014 is illustrated, including form of tenure.*

It may be noted that Sweden does not have a tradition of independent groups acting as house developers, such that exist in Germany, Denmark, USA and other countries (the equivalent to what is called *Baugemeinschaft* in Germany). Of the 52 projects in the map only two are building communities. Recently a national Swedish association for building communities has been formed. Its purpose is to promote self-management, cheaper housing and better design qualities (<http://www.byggemenskap.se/>).

A building community may lead to a sense of community and residential collaboration, but this is not necessarily the aim. Kollektivhus NU is collaborating with the building community association to find ways to reduce costs and promote self-administration.

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Which are the design principles used in the Swedish cohousing models? The PhD thesis by architect researcher Karin Palm Lindén constitutes one of the most comprehensive studies of cohousing design principles. The purpose of her study was to clarify how the various spatial systems in cohousing provide for community versus privacy (Palm Lindén, 1992a, summarized in English in Palm Lindén, 1992b).

The author classified 24 Swedish and one Danish cohousing according to a) residential building type, b) type of communication (stairs, corridors or loggias) and c) location of communal spaces in the building.

	LOCATION OF COMMON ROOMS		
	All common rooms at bottom floor	Common kitchen and diningroom at bottom floor	Common kitchen and diningroom at upper floors
<b>HIGH-RISE BUILDINGS</b>			
One staircase system - without corridors and galleries (A)	Orion x 7 Tunna Pultersta gård	Katthuvudet (Trädgård) Bergaviken Tälja	Staden
- with corridors or galleries (B)	Jakobsberg C Märsta dal Söderström	Prinsgränd baggen Mönda Lina Hag	
Several staircase systems - connected on bottom floor (C)	Mårhådet Pyttstråken	Portuna	
- connected on several floors (D)	Bismarck Svårdet Käpa	Yasa Storö Angräslund	
Central hall/yard (E)			
<b>LOW-RISE BUILDINGS</b>			
Corridor systems (F)	Common rooms placed together Ragnbjörn	Common rooms split	
Central hall/yard (G)	(Björkåa) Jemstoberiet		

An overview of cohouses, classified according to the building type, communication system and location of common spaces (Source: Palm Lindén, 1992b).

The figure shows that the selected cases are distributed across 12 out of 20 possible theoretical options. The wide distribution means that there is no typical model of cohousing design. One may note that a cluster of row houses with outdoor communication to shared spaces – the most common model in Denmark and the USA – is missing

Palm Lindén's study shows that the location of common spaces has an important role for the spontaneous use of these spaces. In addition, the nature of "transitional zones" (entrances, elevator and stairs) are crucial for social interaction and also important for the cohousing to function as a whole. An interesting observation is that the residents may be

attracted to these spaces in tower blocks with common rooms on the ground floor, when they pass the entrance, but not when they have reached their private apartments (Palm Lindén, 1992a).

## Conclusions

The Swedish experience shows that municipal housing companies often build cohousing as a result of demands from independent groups. It may be concluded that the Swedish model is a combination of bottom-up and top-down approaches.

The figure below gives a summary of the driving forces behind Swedish cohousing, as well as the estimated effects. The earlier model with services through employed staff has been separated from the self-work model. For the former the reduction of housework and women's demand for gainful employment were the main causes. It may be concluded that the 17 projects built of this model were successful in reducing housework when this was still a heavy burden. It also promoted a good environment for children, especially for households with single parents.

Behind the self-work model one may trace causes such as demographic change towards more of single households and social isolation in urban areas where kinship ties have been weakened due to rapid structural change. Studies show that the aims have been achieved to a great extent: a moderate level of community in everyday life, increased safety and a certain degree of collaboration between neighbours (Vestbro and Horelli, 2012).

In Swedish cohousing, sustainability issues have not been as prominent as in Denmark, Germany and the US. The ecological argument has become more prominent in recent years, however. Common meals in cohousing constitute a powerful instrument for saving resources. In the cohousing of Tullstugan in Stockholm, for instance, it is estimated that communal cooking replaces the number of food shopping trips by 1000 per year and that the use of private stoves is reduced by 2500 use occasions (Vestbro, 2012).

Ordinary Swedish housing is all but sustainable. One reason is that the average size of households is lower than elsewhere in the world. Young people move from their parents at an early age and divorce rates are high. Long life expectancy is combined with independent partner loss at high ages re-

sults in many single-person households among older people. The number of one-person households has more than doubled over the last 25 years, while households of more than four persons are much less common. Today, about 75% of Swedish households are one or two-person households. In co-housing spaces and facilities may be shared (Vestbro, 2012).

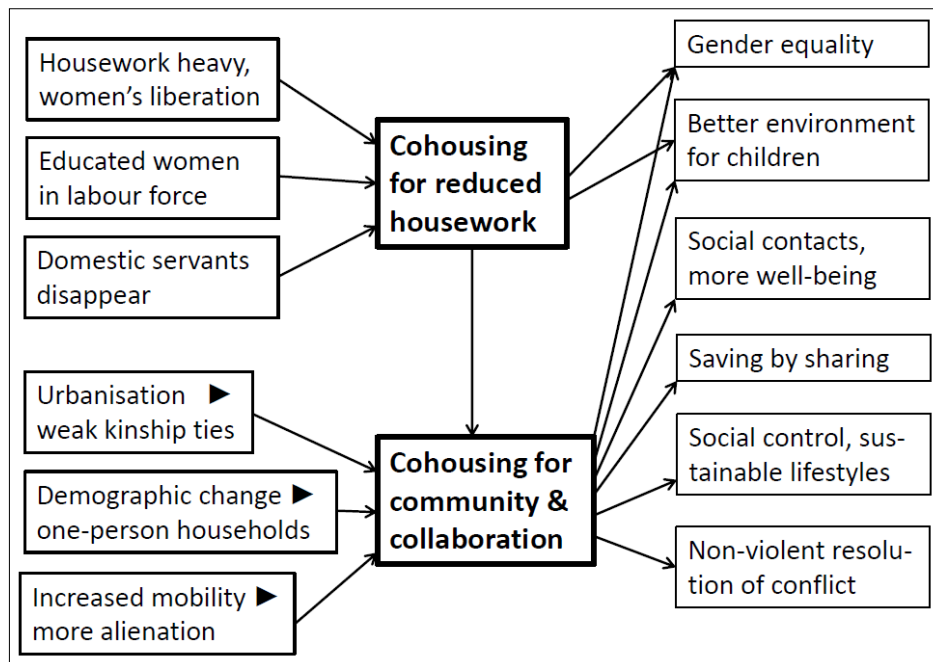


Diagram showing the causes and effects of the Swedish cohousing model.

One may ask why cohousing accounts for such a small part of the housing stock. A major explanation is the resistance from patriarchal society, including both the public and private sectors. Housing with communal facilities has often been conceived as a threat to the nuclear family. Another reason is the lack of public information about alternative ways of living and the prejudices about cohousing, especially among men. The expansion of this supportive form of dwelling needs a new strong movement that is willing to fight for models on the neighbourhood level that are accessible to all social classes (Vestbro & Horelli, 2012).

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