



OMCA

OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA

ANN BUI
HISTORY OF LANDSCAPE DESIGN
SUMMER 2023
INSTRUCTOR: JC MILLER



OVERVIEW

Total museum gallery space: 110,000 square feet

Total museum space (including gardens): 300,000 square feet

OMCA occupies 7.7 acres on four city blocks

OMCA's gardens cover 26,400 square feet; 180 planters

BACKGROUND

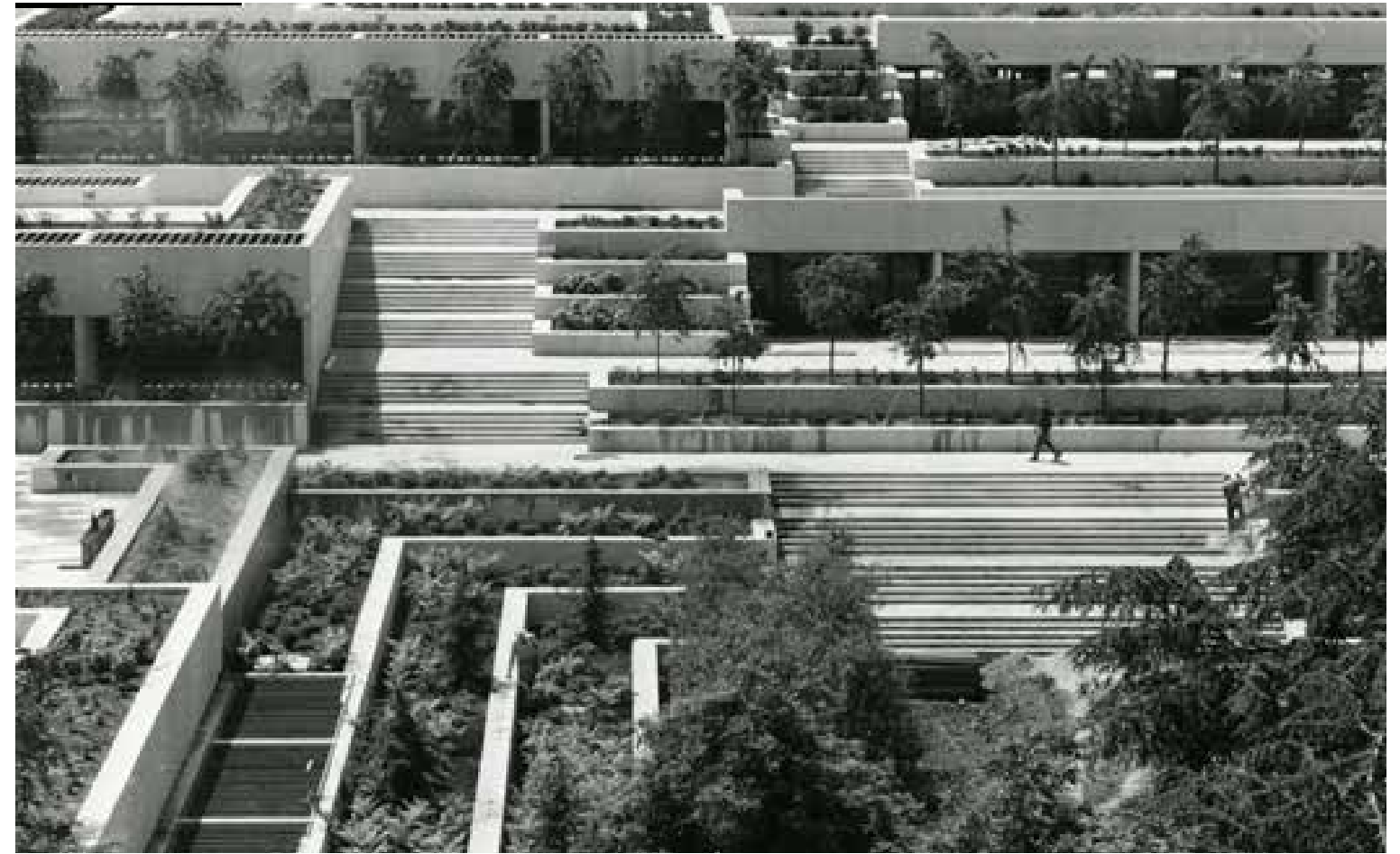
The Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) was established when three organizations -- the Oakland Public Museum, Oakland Art Gallery, and the Snow Museum of Natural History -- developed a nonprofit association to merge their collections under one entity. In 1961, voters approved a bond to develop the OMCA campus overlooking Lake Merritt in the heart of Oakland. Much influence was attributed to the social and political environment of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement given the time period and location of the museum next to the Alameda County Court House which had often held protests affiliated with the Black Panther Party during the museum's opening in 1969. It would be considered the "people's museum" to reflect the diverse community in Oakland. According to OMCA's website, "We are more than a museum. We're a museum, garden, and a gathering place." Its purpose was to create a connection point to welcome and engage the community to celebrate California's art, history, and natural sciences.

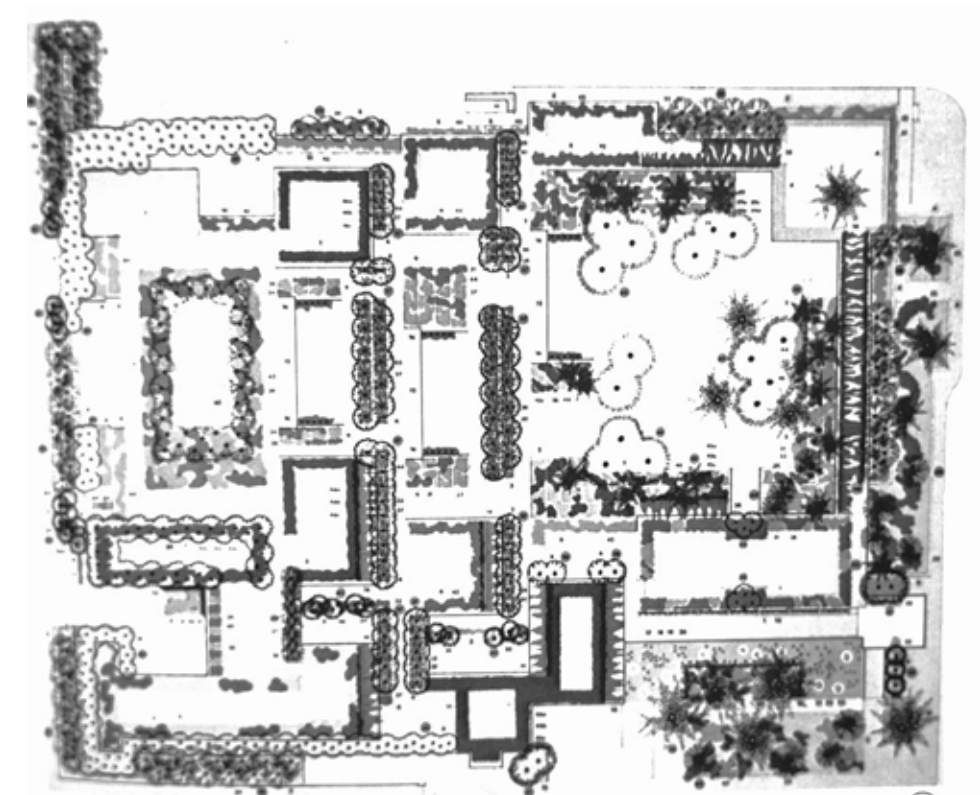
PUBLIC SPACE

The museum was designed by architects Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo, who had become successors of Eero Saarinen's firm after his passing in the early 1960s. This would become their first project since the transition and come shortly after the Kaiser Center Rooftop Garden was completed above a parking garage a mile away. The vision of the design was to create a building that served dual functions as both a museum and a public urban park for the city of Oakland. The rectilinear composition was determined by the architects, reflecting a brutalist concrete structure commonly seen in the postwar period, which was interlaced with terraced gardens, a central courtyard, walkways, koi pond, and outdoor sculpture courts.

The selected landscape architect was Dan Kiley who had already developed a collaborative relationship for more than a decade with the Saarinen office. Over time, this would cultivate a bond such that OMCA was a prime example of integrating both architecture and landscape architecture as one, blurring the lines distinguishing between the two fields. In contrast to Kiley's more formal designs in previous works, the wildness and inspiration of a forest added a softness to the structure's geometry. A play of opposites using lush plantings to contrast the solid concrete forms resulted in the building becoming an icon of midcentury modernist design.

Postmodernism developed in the 1960s with its focus on form and function that sought to find multiple uses for a given site. It still included concepts from Modernism that preferred objects and spaces that were utilitarian and functional with minimal aesthetics and eliminated ornamentation. This period also tried to account for various viewpoints, embracing a wide range of social, economic, cultural, and ecological histories of a site and the diverse needs of its potential users. Postmodernism design was also distinct in integrating architecture, landscape, and public art, often in the form of sculptures.





Composite of overlaid planting plans of groundcover, shrubs, vines, and trees on separate acetate sheets to demonstrate layering and complexity of the design --The Office of Dan Kiley

GARDEN DESIGN

Kiley attributed much of his influence to 17th century French garden designs by Andre Le Notre which Kiley was able to experience when he served in the U.S. Army from 1943 to 1945. During this time, he discovered the language of nature to create spaces, utilizing "lines, allees, orchards or bosques of trees, tapis verts and clipped hedges, canals, pools and fountains could be tools to build landscapes." His works would subsequently incorporate strong geometry, clear axial organization, massing of plant materials, and articulated walls, terraces, and spaces.

For OMCA, Kiley was commissioned to layout the terraced planes. He enlisted local landscape architect Geraldine Knight Scott for guidance on plant selection. In addition, Joe Karr, who had worked on the project with Kiley, indicated they had referenced *Sunset Magazine* to learn which plants would be suitable for OMCA as Kiley was primarily familiar with plantings in the Midwest and Northeast. Kiley and the team were not familiar with Mediterranean climate plants on the west coast and would rely on Scott as the horticulture consultant, particularly with California natives. Both natives and non-native evergreens were used on the project. Scott and her UC Berkeley colleague, Mai Arbegast, would work to preserve, protect, and restore the museum's landscape for the next 25 years. Despite the male dominated climate of the time, Scott and Arbegast would be pioneers in the profession, enhancing education in landscape architecture and serving as consultants for numerous projects in the region.

The garden consisted of three levels that descended from north to south, providing views of Lake Merritt and the surrounding city from terraces and balconies that led to a sunken courtyard. The terrace of each level formed the roof of the one below and were connected by wide flights of concrete steps. The initial intent of the tiered concrete planters were to include small pear, olive, and pine trees, shrubs, and vines that would cascade over terraced walls. The courtyard lawn also had a diagonally bisected pathway that would direct towards Lake Merritt, and be edged by cedar, oak, and eucalyptus trees.

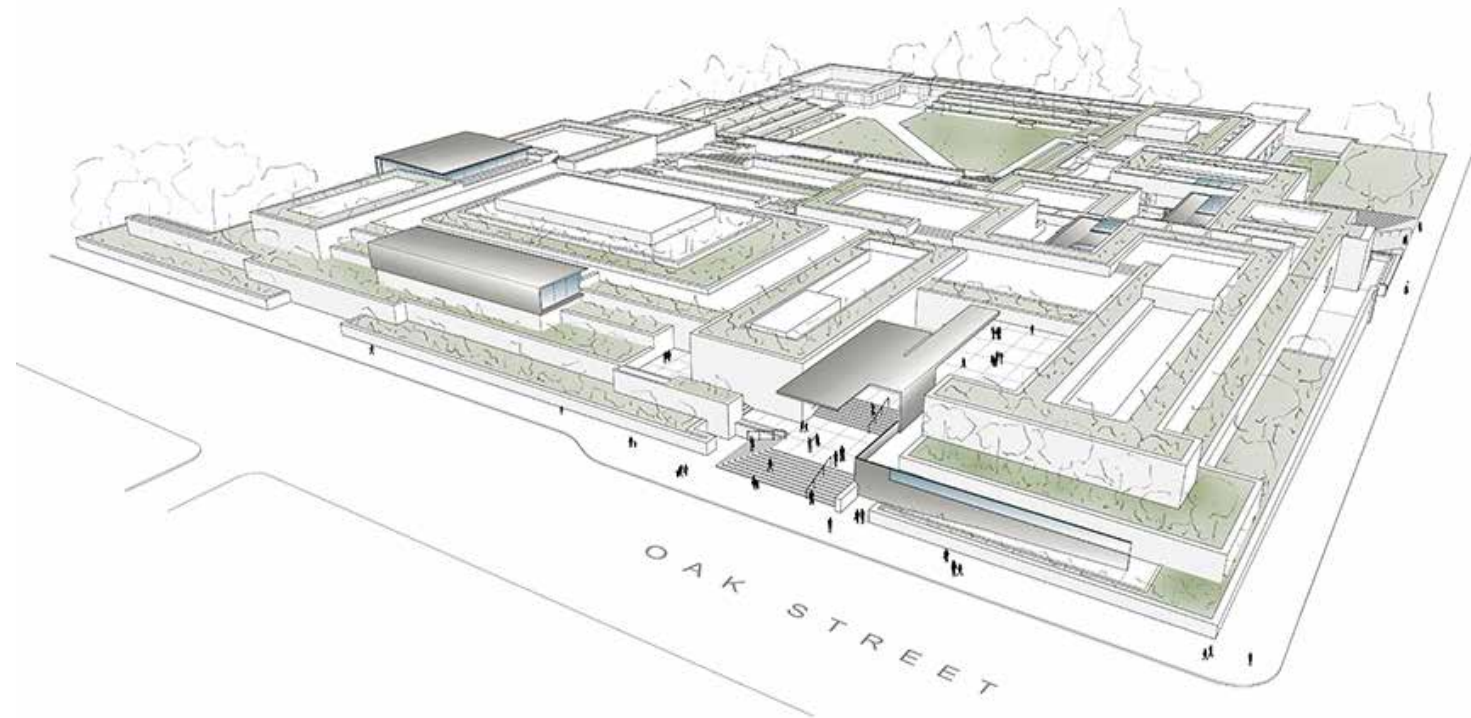


RENOVATION

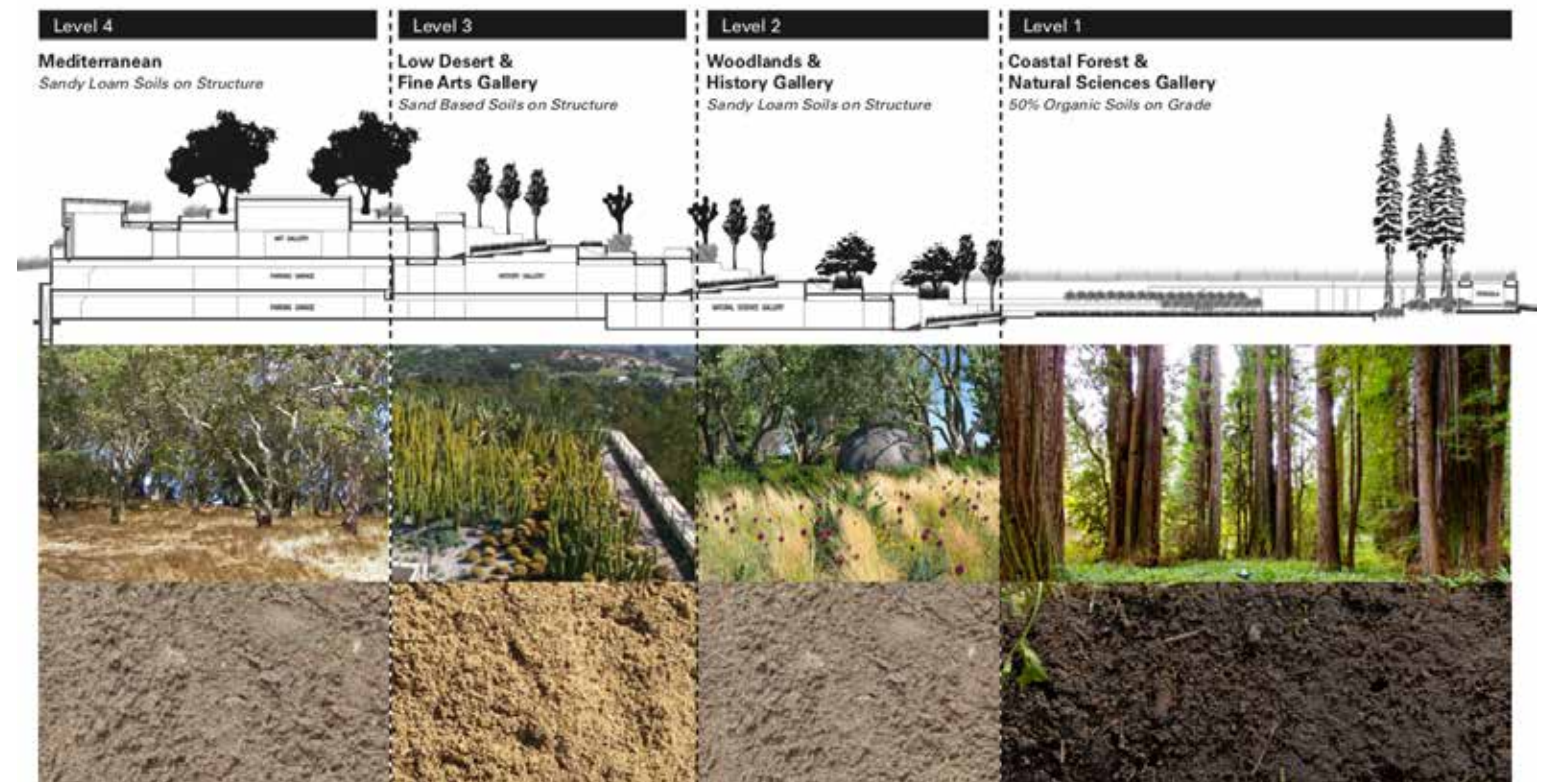
In May 2010, OMCA reopened following a renovation and expansion overseen by the architecture firm, Mark Cavagnero Associates. Modifications included new exhibition and programming spaces, modernized lighting, an enhanced skylit canopy entrance, and improvements to the museum's theater, café, and store.

In 2019, landscape architect Walter Hood (Hood Design Studio) and project architect Mark Cavagnero broke ground on the next renovation phase, focused on enhancing access to the multi-terraced campus, improving visitor amenities, and significantly updating and refreshing the planting scheme to represent ecoregions of California. Design plans included the removal of an exterior border wall along the Museum's northern side, connecting to Oakland's Lake Merritt and creating a new entrance to open the campus and increase public access to its gardens.

During the renovation, Cavagnero and Hood approached the project as a series of dialogues, including a dialogue with Roche-Dinkeloo and Kiley's original vision. Cavagnero likened the midcentury Brutalist style to a Mayan temple with thick and heavy walls. To contrast from the former design, he opted for light, stainless steel to redirect and make the new additions seemingly float. Hood leaned into the same approach as Kiley, softening the cold, hard edges with grasses and wildflowers that spill out from the planter beds in a similar manner to abandoned Roman aqueducts where nature would take over, which was more fitting to acknowledge the "dormant state of civilization" in the COVID pandemic period when the renovations were occurring.



Cross Section of California
Planting by Ecoregions





DESIGN ANALYSIS AND SITE DETAILS



A

The entrance of OMCA on Oak Street appears to have some version of a raised Palladian platform, or plinth, though not under a traditional column or pier. The rectangular base still grounds and supports the structure, and serves as an entrance statement to visitors.

B

In terms of large scale, form, and significance, Cheryl Barton, who had also worked at the Office of Dan Kiley, considered OMCA to be a modern equivalent of Queen Hatshepsut's Tomb during ancient Egyptian times, as it was an early indication that landscape was integrated into the site, sometimes with irrigation, based on archeological research. Peter Walker noted OMCA was the first project that used fertilization through the watering system, so plants would simultaneously get fed and watered, though it would lead to rapid and uneven growth in the Mediterranean climate. Also similar to Queen Hatshepsut, OMCA had a centralized but staggered staircase with a series of terraced platforms.

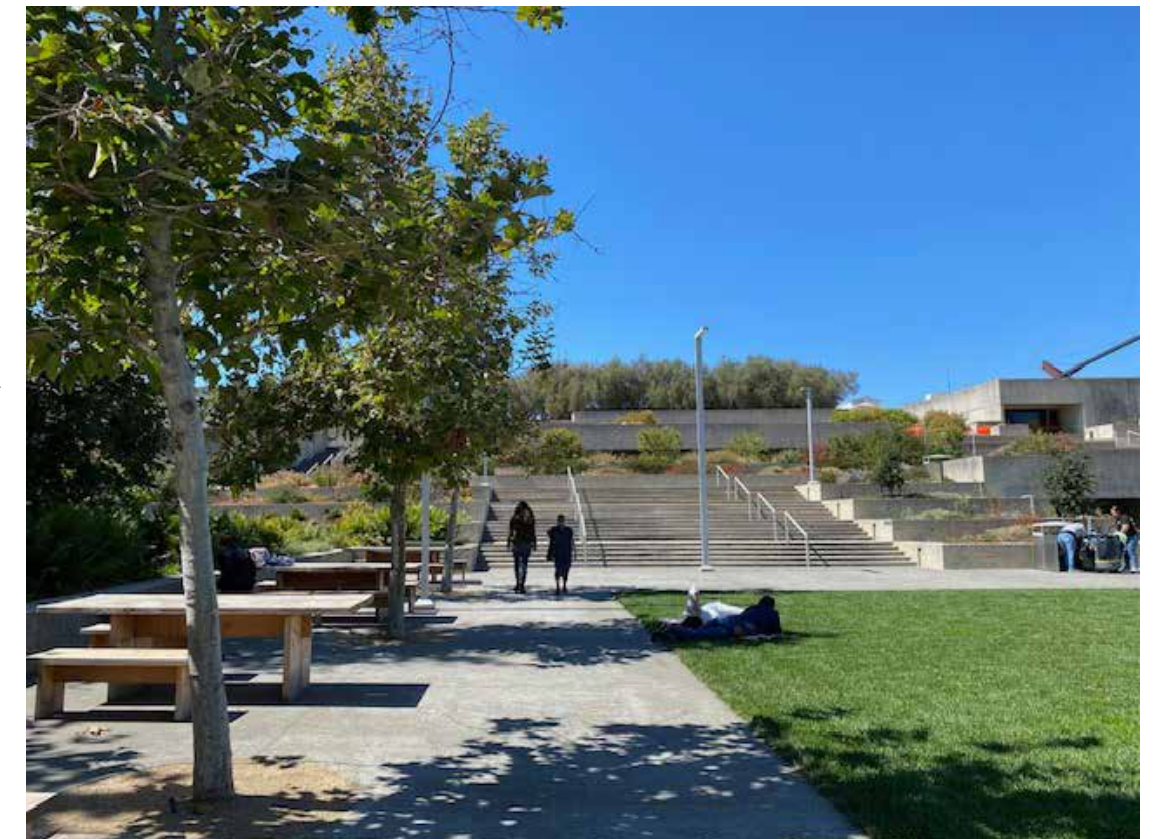


C

The Italian Renaissance would echo the integration of plantings with architecture with formal terraced gardens and extensive views outward. OMCA design would show Kiley's influence from Le Notre with the 17th century French design of tapis vert, or green carpet, which initially included a diagonal that bisected the courtyard lawn and directed the eye to the northern corner entrance with views toward Lake Merritt. OMCA also borrows the Baroque idea of using a garden to be experienced as a series of terraces and stairs, though without the formality of clipped hedges or parterres and, rather, celebrating the natural shape and form of plants without significant human intervention.

D

Hood incorporated a line of trees like the organization found in 17th century French gardens to frame and shade walking paths, as it often was similarly used in Kiley's former works for structure and form.



ENLARGEMENT

[DRAWING BY MARK CAVAGNERO ASSOCIATES]



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