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**REIMAGINING ABANDONED COMMUNITY
SPACE IN A POST-PANDEMIC ENVIRONMENT**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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Description/Abstract:

The community marketplace is a vital piece of infrastructure that has existed since the beginning of history. The first recorded marketplace dates back to the Bronze Age when a network of markets emerged across the Mediterranean and Aegean seas¹. The idea of a market as a public space where for culture and society flourishes has developed and been reinvented since then. The Agora, or central marketplace in ancient Athens, was a byproduct of the trading activities that occurred along the fertile crescent. Beyond just a center for trade, the Agora held athletic contests, political meetings, and religious festivals which both royalty and commoners attended². Ancient Greece and Mesopotamia also developed their own cultural practices through markets. Creating public community spaces, they provided autonomy over the buying and selling of local goods. In many cases, this led to new innovations in technology and communication. This same type of public community space has evolved over centuries into what is now more commercial and privately-owned markets. These markets were expanded into giant retail complexes, becoming an American institution that, to this day, citizens and foreigners flock to in order to participate in the ultimate consumer experience³.

The foremost community space where commercialism meets experientialism, the Great American Mall became a unique symbol of community development and prosperity in the mid-twentieth century. Then, as we entered the age of online shopping in the early twenty-first century the popularity of malls began to diminish. Unable to sustain in-person shopping, large

¹ McMillan, John. 2002. *Reinventing the Bazaar*. Norton.

² McMillan, John. 2002.

³ Sanburn, Josh. 2020. "The Death and Life of the American Shopping Mall." Time. July 17, 2020.

department stores like JC Penney and Neiman Marcus began to close ⁴. When all of the major anchor stores in a mall close, the entire mall shuts down. This has been the case for both low- and high-end malls across the country. It is now predicted that by 2022, half of all 116,000 malls in America will be obsolete⁵. Therefore, thousands of acres of mall space that accounted for some of the largest malls around the country will be abandoned. The resulting community spaces are commonly bought up by new commercial ventures or abandoned in towns that are struggling to survive.

Earlier this year, the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the demise of the Great American Mall by forcing temporary and permanent closures across the country. The low-end malls that remain are dealing with crippling debt and the closing of key department stores like JC Penney and Neiman Marcus⁶. With only super-luxury malls thriving, many of the standard malls set up in the eighties are just abandoned parts of a community. So, what should happen to these abandoned malls? And what role does that space now play in the post-pandemic community? Since malls began to shut-down pre-Covid-19 did the need for community interaction spaces simply just go away? These questions underline a reimagining of the Great American mall and its role as a community space.

Throughout this project I explore the evolution of the community marketplace as I propose a redesign of an abandoned community mall in Landover, Maryland. My design references post-pandemic design practices as defined by new research released by the Center for

⁴ Griscom Little, Amanda. 2005. "The Mall That Would Save America." *New York Times Magazine*, July 3, 2005. 215478603. Global Newsstream.

⁵ Ewen, Lara. 2020. "Virus- Responsive Design: In the Age of COVID-19, Architects Merge Future-facing Innovations with Present-Day Needs." *American Libraries* 51 (9/10): 36–40.

⁶ Sanburn, Josh. 2020. "The Death and Life of the American Shopping Mall." *Time*. July 17, 2020.

Disease Control (CDC)⁷ and the American Institute of Architects (AIA)⁸. Using an experimental approach, I challenge the idea of a traditional American mall by creating a model of an eco-friendly marketplace. My two- and three-dimensional visual representations are the culmination of my community studies through local media coverage and interviews with residents and stakeholders. This theoretical redesign promotes the development of imaginative visual representations which can inspire communities to build structures that support healthy recreation and socialization. In this way, visionary design can spur social change within a community.

My fascination with abandoned malls was inspired by my childhood experience with the constant rise and fall of strip malls in Maryland. Two years ago, I decided to research the abandoned lot across from the manufacturing plant where I worked. The site was known as the deconstructed Landover Mall Complex in Landover, Maryland⁹. The Landover Mall opened in 1972 off of Interstates 95 and 495 in the growing D.C. suburb of Landover¹⁰. The Mall flourished as a major attraction in the 80's and 90's with 4 anchor stores, 2 of which were national chains, Sears and F.W. Woolworth's. My survey responses suggest that the mall was a place young people visited after school to hang out with their friends and get food¹¹. Once a bustling suburb of DC, the town of Landover experienced an economic downturn in the 90s resulting in increased crime and unemployment. In consequence, the major department stores at Landover Mall decided to close their doors and then the mall experienced a slow decline until it

⁷ CDC. 2020. "Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. February 11, 2020.

⁸ "COVID-19 Resources for Architects - AIA." American Institute of Architects. 2020.

⁹ Leventhal, Alexis. 2016. "Landover Regional Shopping Center: The Perceptions and Realities That Caused a Mall to Fall," 48.

¹⁰ Leventhal, Alexis. 2016.

¹¹ See Appendix.

was completely shut down in 2002. The entire complex was demolished by 2006 and even though the property was passed around between developers for many years, it remains vacant to this day¹².

Process, Materials and Methods:

In order to represent a reimagining of the abandoned Landover Mall site, I have created a 3D animation of the transformed environment. This is featured alongside development sketches and site maps of the demolished area. The sketches show the layering of the new model footprint over land parcel maps I found on the Prince George's County online database. Viewers will be able to interact with my 3D landscape by looking around the newly designed space and experiencing it at their own pace. In the same way architects and designers create three dimensional walkthroughs of finished homes in real estate, my model will engage the imagination of viewers and further develop their understanding of a post-pandemic marketplace. Since my design draws on the idea of a Utopian future, it features sustainable design techniques in a conceptual way. This includes structures made from locally sourced building materials that expand upon the existing landscape instead of exploiting it.

By incorporating greenery into my design, I am developing a park-like community space for residents to publicly access. Since the surrounding area is an industrial zone, community members expressed a desire for green space in their surveys¹³. The commonly held notion of green space promoting the overall health and happiness of a community is supported by a study completed by the University of Wisconsin. Based on a public health survey they conducted, the

¹² Leventhal, 36.

¹³ See Appendix.

happiness of residents is directly correlated to the amount of green space in their community based on an index of vegetation per square mile¹⁴. Another study performed by the University of Exeter in the UK, used eighteen years of survey data to prove that living close to green space can yield similar feelings to getting a new job or getting married¹⁵. This research shows that new developments designed using eco-friendly practices can improve the well-being of largely urban-industrial communities like Landover. While commercial malls may increase the happiness of their surrounding area, they aren't proven to increase the livability or quality of life for residents¹⁶.

Resources and References:

The case studies I performed on urban planning and sustainability strategies while abroad brought me to the work of the architects Le Corbusier and Ricardo Bofill. Their work emphasizes the urban unit and the creation of wellness spaces in an urban setting¹⁷. Their idea of “health” through architecture is enforced through active design guidelines which improve the walkability of a building or area and anticipate interaction sites to make them safer for participants¹⁸. Le Corbusier, in his conceptual approach to demolishing central Paris in his 1920 Plan Voisin, modeled a grid of 18 cruciform glass towers that housed offices, living, and

¹⁴ Beyer, Kirsten M. M., Andrea Kaltenbach, Aniko Szabo, Sandra Bogar, F. Javier Nieto, and Kristen M. Malecki. 2014. “Exposure to Neighborhood Green Space and Mental Health: Evidence from the Survey of the Health of Wisconsin.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 11 (3): 3453–72.

¹⁵ Beyer, Kirsten M. M., Andrea Kaltenbach, Aniko Szabo, Sandra Bogar, F. Javier Nieto, and Kristen M. Malecki, 3.

¹⁶ Sanburn, Josh. 2020. “The Death and Life of the American Shopping Mall.” *Time*. July 17, 2020.

¹⁷ Serenyi, Peter. 1974. *Le Corbusier in Perspective* /. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.

¹⁸ Serenyi, 134.

shopping in a vertical manner in order to maximize green space for recreation¹⁹. While this design was unsuccessful in its boldness to destroy everything in the Marais, it represented a pivot from experimental planning towards community wellness planning. This similar practice of utopian design introduces a futuristic approach to sustainability. It shows that a building is considered sustainable when it meets the physical, mental, and emotional needs of its occupants. This is very important to the development of post-pandemic friendly spaces because fear grips every community in the midst of Covid-19 causing physical and emotional instability²⁰. A return to social spaces in a post-pandemic environment requires the assurance of safety and stability in innovative design methods.

Since new research is released daily about coronavirus and methods of prevention, my design includes spaces that can adapt to new standards. On May 6, 2020 the American Institute of Architects (AIA) released design guidelines on moving furniture and seating areas outdoors and making space for people to stay farther apart indoors²¹. My research also revealed that post-pandemic design needs to accommodate social distancing as a dynamic situation. This means pedestrians need to be able to move around each other in a safe way which can be achieved by providing a farther line of sight, allowing the pedestrian more time to prepare for possible interaction²². Designing with less corners for bumping into people and hallways with pull-off

¹⁹ Boesiger, Willy, and Pierre Jeanneret. 1964. *Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret: oeuvre complete 1910-1929. Vol. 1*. Zurich: Les Editions d'Architecture.

²⁰ Ewen, Lara. 2020. "Virus- Responsive Design: In the Age of COVID-19, Architects Merge Futurefacing Innovations with Present-Day Needs." *American Libraries* 51 (9/10): 36–40.

²¹ McKnight, Jenna. 2020. "Architects Envision Ways to Make Restaurants Safe During a Pandemic." June 15, 2020.

²² Ewen, 37.

areas allows people to flow through a space in a safer way²³. This alludes to a deeper way of looking at and predicting the flow of people through a space and how to anticipate possible disruptions to that flow.

Earlier this year MASS Design Group, a nonprofit that has built several medical facilities in the U.S. and Europe, produced a report called “Spatial Strategies for Restaurants in response to Covid-19.”²⁴ The report offers businesses a framework for infection control, calling for extra tall partitions between groups and tables to be set up a minimum of six feet apart²⁵. Beyond what we know as standard Covid-19 protocol, they discuss small greenhouse-style dining pavilions for each party and French designer Christoph Gerginon’s plexiglass hoods that hang from the ceiling indoors²⁶. Amanda Markovic, a principle at GBBN architects, says that “design is about ensuring flexibility for the future” in case a pandemic were to happen again²⁷. In libraries across the country, isolated study pods and “roomlet” bathrooms are being created to keep the public safe²⁸. These new approaches apply to every type of social space in the Covid-era and were developed to safeguard community spaces against an uncertain future. This leads me to believe that social spaces will continue to be important components of each community as long as the designs can evolve to meet new health and safety standards.

²³ Ewen, 38.

²⁴Ewen, Lara. 2020. “Virus- Responsive Design: In the Age of COVID-19, Architects Merge Future-facing Innovations with Present-Day Needs.” *American Libraries* 51 (9/10): 36–40.

²⁵Ewen, 38.

²⁶ Ewen, 39.

²⁷ Tingley, Kim. 2020. “How Architecture Could Help Us Adapt to the Pandemic.” *The New York Times*, June 9, 2020, sec. Magazine.

²⁸ Tingley, Kim. 2020.

As of 2020 before the pandemic, the standard American mall was an average of 190,000 square feet and included 6 major department stores²⁹. The mall was designed for maximum storefront flow and recreation attractions. Standard American malls are equipped with large food courts, retail spaces, and movie theatres that sell fast food and fast fashion³⁰. This type of marketing and design of a mall not only creates an excessive amount of waste but promotes unhealthy lifestyle choices. Based on my research on the impact of the great American mall, the healthiest aspect of a mall in the U.S. is the abundance of open interior and exterior spaces to walk around³¹. This also applies to post-pandemic design solutions because open spaces allow for clean air flow and less unintended interactions.

Unlike the standard mall, my design will be focused on increasing the percentage of community initiatives available in public spaces. Increased access to markets, green space, and kid-friendly spaces can increase the quality of life for residents when designed with their specific needs in mind³². In this case, there is both a need for recreation areas as well as interior social spaces residents can utilize during the Winter months³³. My understanding of a resident focused community space is exemplified by the “Superblocks” developed by Ildefons in Barcelona’s L’Eixample neighborhood. Each “Superblock” community was designed to have direct access to green space and sunlight in almost every location³⁴. There are places to walk your dog and let

²⁹ Sanburn, Josh. 2020. “The Death and Life of the American Shopping Mall.” Time. July 17, 2020.

³⁰ McKnight, Jenna. 2020. “Architects Envision Ways to Make Restaurants Safe During a Pandemic.” June 15, 2020.

³¹ McKnight, Jenna. 2020.

³² Barrett, Meredith A. 2014. “Parks and Health: Aligning Incentives to Create Innovations in Chronic Disease Prevention.” *Preventing Chronic Disease* 11.

³² See Appendix.

³⁴ Neuman, Michael. 2011. “Ildefons Cerdà and the Future of Spatial Planning: The Network Urbanism of a City Planning Pioneer.” *The Town Planning Review* 82 (2): 117–43.

your children play as well as business centers and grocery markets on each block³⁵. Research completed by the National Recreation and Park Association shows that green areas like these make communities healthier by providing access to growing spaces which support healthier food options³⁶. This idea of equal access to resources is not something that has been widely available in an urban setting. The communities that can't afford to create or maintain safe green spaces are proven to have the highest rates of obesity³⁷. While the idea of entirely sustainable city blocks is inherently flawed, it draws on the idea of wellness being directly connected to community social spaces being close by. This problem can be partially solved by the integration of more parks and green spaces into community design, but public marketplaces can also solve these wellness issues when they provide access to healthy foods, public social spaces, and recreation areas.

The concept of my design is to bring social and recreation space back to this mixed residential and industrial community. This would not only be healthy for residents, but it would also improve Landover's reputation by creating a safe space in a community moving away from its difficult past. My original plan for a visual representation of the structure was to develop a high-fidelity model that could meet all of the Landover Mall's site-specific criteria. This would involve using the exact footprint of the old mall to match current zoning permissions. As my artistic process developed, I came to the understanding that in order to create a design that could transform a community, the concept must be aspirational, not high fidelity. This allows it to exceed the limitations that a professional architectural model is subjected to. Without concern for

³⁵ Neuman, Michael. 2011.

³⁶ Barrett, Meredith A. 2014. "Parks and Health: Aligning Incentives to Create Innovations in Chronic Disease Prevention." *Preventing Chronic Disease* 11.

³⁷ Barrett, Meredith A. 2014.

structural integrity, I am able to think outside the box in terms of sustainable design. This allowed me to incorporate wood into the geodesic dome and rotating slats onto the side of the building.

Digital modeling, a process used by architects and artists since the introduction of computers, plays an important role in moving communities forward. The international firm MAD Architects says that conceptual design allows us to explore new frontiers, infrastructures, master plans, individual spaces, and details without real world constraints that limit radical ideas³⁸. In 2017, MAD released their conceptual plans for Huagshan Mountain Village in China³⁹. With its elegant curves which reflect the Huagshan landscape, the residential complex aimed to be a quiet and peaceful place to reflect on the village as a heritage site. Each unit would have provided a full suite of public amenities and the design included a network of paths connecting the residents to the forest and gardens. Late in the development process, the plan was deemed too expensive and unnecessary for the location. Even though the design was never fully realized, it brought public attention to the heritage site, which in turn convinced the local government to make improvements to the area⁴⁰. The streets were repaved and a new apartment complexes were built. The city is now known as both a tourist destination and a national heritage site.

Theorist and sociologist Jean Baudrillard also discussed the power of the conceptual in his 1981 philosophical treatise *Simulacra and Simulation*⁴¹. He claims that society has replaced

³⁸ Ewen, Lara. 2020. "Virus- Responsive Design: In the Age of COVID-19, Architects Merge Future-facing Innovations with Present-Day Needs." *American Libraries* 51 (9/10): 36–40.

³⁹ Hudson, Danny. 2012. "Designboom 2012 Top Ten: Conceptual Architecture." Designboom | Architecture & Design Magazine. December 21, 2012.

⁴⁰ Yansong, Ma. 2017. "MAD Architects: Huagshan Mountain Village."

⁴¹ Baudrillard, Jean. c1994. *Simulacra and Simulation* /. Ann Arbor.

reality and meaning with signs and symbols making human experience merely a symbol of reality⁴². This absence of profound reality gives power to conceptual ideas because there is no real difference between the imagined, which is the model, and the actual, the structure. By separating this design from the current reality of the site I will be producing a concept that solely reflects the modern age's fascination with technology and its impact on the community. In the same way technology and media defines our social interactions, it also makes up the communities we live in. My use of three-dimensional modeling will thus represent the interaction between conceptual reality and digital reality. Since the model floats in an undefined spaced like an avatar island, it is placed in a conceptual reality that displays a digital rendering of what could be real.

Another key aspect of the medium of my project is that digitally rendered models, when made available on multiple platforms, are both more accessible and more democratic in nature. This is because films and installations are normally only made available to those who have the ability to enter a cinema or museum. Walter Benjamin in his essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, develops the idea of technological reproduction stripping the power away from higher art institutions and giving it to the masses to experience⁴³. Therefore, by taking away the formality of making work for a gallery, I am allowing a much broader audience to experience my work. Anyone with access to a computer, with or without an education, can understand the work just by recognizing it as a structure. This transfer of power away from the exclusivity of the twentieth century art gallery is beneficial to the dissemination and genuine appreciation of artistic work. Even though digital art can easily become a product and lose its

⁴² Baudrillard, Jean. c1994.

⁴³ Benjamin, Andrew. 2005. *Walter Benjamin and Art*. Walter Benjamin Studies Series. London: Continuum.

initial aura, or sense of authenticity, it can still heavily influence the ideological values of the public⁴⁴. In this case, I am making a model to convince an entire community to reexamine their abandoned public space and make use of it in a safer and more complex way.

My engagement with Google Earth was the first way I was able to examine the Landover Mall site as an abandoned space. The parcel and land map images I used in my research show how GPS, telephone, tablets, and satellite imagery have changed our use of space. The different pattern overlays in the parcel maps represent the ways in which different utilities and construction developments interact with the landscape. In his series “Typologie du Virtuel”, Thibault Brunet explores the question of virtuality in contemporary space through Google Earth in a series of rendered structures⁴⁵. He reproduces images of buildings located in a peri-urban area in France using fragments from different virtual worlds produced by his peers⁴⁶. The files he created using these three-dimensional images are copyright-free so they can be expanded by potential users and added to the Google archive. This process of subtle modification to a space over-time shows how virtual archives threaten individual and collective boundaries. My intervention with the Landover mall site is indicative of this because I chose to analyze Google Earth data for targeted use. By capturing site images, I am engaging in a form of surveillance that Google supports, but I chose to reappropriate the data to serve the community, evaluating it with personal and local knowledge.

Production:

⁴⁴ Benjamin, Andrew. 2005. *Walter Benjamin and Art*. Walter Benjamin Studies Series. London: Continuum.

⁴⁵ Thibault Brunet, and Marguerite Pilven. 2018. “Typologie Du Virtuel | Thibault Brunet.” Transfer.

⁴⁶ Thibault Brunet, and Marguerite Pilven. 2018.

In the beginning stages of my design process, I considered many different ways to present the model and its surrounding landscape. My initial idea was to include the context of the surrounding landscape and represent it being next to a highway and adjacent to two main roads. The issue with this form of presentation is that the context of the surrounding roadways isn't very specific. Also, focusing on the exact placement of the neighboring sites would liken the model to an architectural plan which is more formal than I wanted. While I approached this design with an architectural background, I wanted to emphasize it as a conceptual model rather than a construction plan since I was given feedback to focus on redesigning with an artist's intent. This way, I would stay away from technical formalities like electrical plans and transportation. Therefore, there is no need for this design to be a professional draft. This led me to present my model as an island floating in the clouds. The piece of land includes the Mall's ring road as well as the adjacent highways. The floating model is surrounded by a cloudy sky as a visual cue for viewers to see the model as a product of imaginative visualization. In this way, the model is aspirational instead of a formal plan to be reviewed for structural integrity. In its current format, the model floats like an idyllic world to which a community can only aspire.

When I began sketching the main building, I was focused on having it look enveloped in its green landscape. I placed two grass paths going up the side of the building, separating the paneled sides from the geodesic dome. These paths place the focus on the dome being above ground while the first and second floor are placed into the landscape. Since the best way to complement a green space is to provide sunlight, I decided to focus on maximizing sunlight on the interior of the building. My research brought me to the complexity of geodesic domes and how they allow sunlight in at all angles. The intricate geodesic structure and the glass display allow the building to blend into its industrial landscape in a unique way.

My idea to fuse natural and industrial elements together brought me to the most basic building materials: wood, glass, and cement. These are also materials that can be locally sourced and therefore are more eco-conscious and preserve energy. I also focus on energy preservation by tilting the dome towards the east where the sun rises to heat the building in the morning and cool the building by the evening. I think the eco-friendly elements I included in my model such as the light adapting side panels, cement siding, and solar panels add to the idea of an adaptive utopia. The structure, as a post-pandemic marketplace, is designed to be able to adapt to the changing climate and possible future health crises. I tried to detail this in the rendered model by adding temporary seating, recreation equipment, and undesignated market stalls. These play an important role in allowing residents to imagine different uses and variations for the one marketplace.

Another key element of my design is the socially distanced recreation features I include on the building and along the property. I chose to utilize both vertical and horizontal space with terraces and outdoor areas in order to adhere more efficiently to social distance guidelines. The terraces along the side of the building are for seating, lounging, and picnicking in a safe manner since the space is maximized through vertical sections. The separate sections of grass on the terraces are laid out to space each group by six feet if they stay within the bounds of each rectangle. Along the front of the building I chose to include a stone patio for outdoor dining and workstations. Here I use the sections of the overhang to indicate safe table and group spacing. I also chose to include socially safe outdoor entertainment options such as ping pong, tennis, and a skatepark. Since I personally experienced the surrounding industrial area being overwhelmed by teens loitering and skating in parking lots, I wanted to model a designated space for them to go. Even though skating can include close interactions, it is a very individualistic sport and therefore

much safer than other forms of group recreation. Overall, the goal of including socially safe seating and recreation in my model is to visually represent a space that functions as a community space for all ages to enjoy.

Throughout this project my design process shifted to reflect both the continuously changing pandemic research as well as the information I was receiving in community surveys. While this made progress very difficult, it allowed me to keep altering my designs to better fit the community and the landscape I was working with. It was my goal from the beginning to approach the site design from many different perspectives. I wanted to learn about eco-friendly design practices, resident-focused urban planning, and anti-virus-built environments. The information I collected from each of these fields led me to the overall theme of wellness-focused design. This type of design is about creating a space that promotes the overall physical, mental, and emotional wellness of its occupants. As our communities continue to innovate and move towards this idea of a technologically balanced utopia, the everyday lives and patterns of residents are simplified. Everyday errands are streamlined, and simple chores are replaced by technological improvements. The way a community is developed dictates the way residents interact and move about their environment. Three-dimensional modeling, as a vessel for innovation, becomes increasingly integrated into society, influencing our decisions on a daily basis.

Using the Landover Mall as a case study and development site, I chose to imagine a structure and landscape that could evolve to meet ever-changing health and safety standards. By developing a three-dimensional model to represent this, I was able to put a large amount of archived data and community insight into one succinct marketplace that can be easily understood by viewers. In the case of Covid-19, and the increasing number of abandoned spaces in the

United States, futuristic three-dimensional models represent a hopeful future. Just like all of the community-improvement models that have come before, a post-pandemic model has the ability to spur social change in the form of the simplest community improvements or an entirely new school of thought. The hope is that they can be easily understood, supported, and then implemented by a community.

Appendix

I received a total of 9 responses to my survey distributed to Landover residents and workers by the end of my design process. 5 out of 9 respondents had been working or living in Landover for 10 years or more. 4 out of 9 respondents have memories associated with the Landover Mall including going there after school to get a soda with friends or going to the movie theatre. 8 out of 9 respondents said they wished Landover had more green space and 6 of those people said they wish that green space was in the form of park-like areas. 9 out of 9 respondents said there were no current public recreation areas in Landover proper. Finally, 4 out of 9 respondents said they feel safe going to a mall or shopping center during the pandemic.

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