

University of Miami School of Architecture
Faculty Oral Histories

Interview with James Brazil
Emerging Practitioner Teaching Fellowship
OHHO Noodles Market restaurant, Coral Gables, Florida, October 13, 2016

Interviewed by Gilda Santana

Recorded by Gilda Santana

Interview Length: 1:06:55

Summary: James Brazil is the first recipient of *The Emerging Practitioner Teaching Fellowship*, established by Dean Rodolphe el-Khoury in the Fall of 2016. Brazil, is an architecturally trained Australian designer and researcher, and a founding partner of [uABureau](#), a design collaborative dedicated to the research and design of urban and public architecture. His work lies at the intersection of architecture, construction, technology, and landscape. He has gained extensive design and fabrication experience across a variety of high-profile architecture, urban and art projects in Australia, Europe and South America. Brazil is interested in analyzing methods to improve urban resilience with architectural projects and urban strategies that propel macro-scale (city and region) social and economic development. The fellowship will allow him to advance his current research agenda while assisting UMSoA with the expansion of digital fabrication technologies. Brazil joined the Faculty for the 2016-2017 academic year.

Gilda Santana: What brought you to Miami?

James Brazil: The University of Miami inaugurated a research fellowship program, and I was fortunate enough to be the recipient of the award.

I'm originally from Perth, Western Australia, by way of Barcelona. I've been living in Barcelona for the last seven years, and before that I was living in Edinburgh, Scotland for a few years. I did my Masters of Architecture in Perth and left immediately afterwards.

GS: I'm curious to hear about this marketplace project that you're doing in Coconut Grove.

JB: The Dean asked me to integrate projects into a research agenda. I was awarded the fellowship based on the work that I'd already done in my studio, the uABureau. It was chance to do the things the things that I'm currently working on within an academic setting. This marketplace project is the first kind of project that is more based in an architecture and urbanism academic setting. By default, I specialize in the design field component, mainly because as a young architect I see the practice evolving more along the lines of "architect as master builder"—the renaissance architect, especially, now with digital tools and the way that the internet has brought about possibilities to work with each other, and with machines. Through the internet we can see how more things are coming under our control. What I teach students here at UM is the way that I practice, and the way I practice is we do it all. Inside the uABureau we are fundamentally a team of makers and builders,

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a group of engineers, artists, architects, designers, from across the globe. One thing we all have in common is that we all know how to build our creations or our creative ideas.

So this all feeds back to the marketplace project. Even before I arrived in Miami, Carie Penabad [Director of Undergraduate Program], who was on the search committee, was already making links. The school was expecting my arrival more so than I thought. I thought I'd fly in undercover a little bit and just focus on my things. But what I really wanted was to work with faculty members to integrate a little bit into the University works. And, to my surprise, the University is a perfect fit for someone like me. This marketplace example is best example of this, I think. The marketplace project is headed by Chuck Bohl, of MRED+U program, and Armando Montero. It took one hour of talking with Armando before I was chucked into the team. It seems to make perfect sense for me to come onto the project as the lead designer and curator, with Armando as project architect who has decades of experience working in Miami. And then we have Chuck, the director of the program and the recipient of the grant for this project from the Knight Foundation.

GS: What does this project mean for the community?

JB: This is why the Dean invited me here. I've only been practicing five or six years. I'm a very young architect. I've only graduated ten years ago.

GS: I'm keen on getting the perspectives from young architects in terms of practice and pedagogy. What are some of the challenges you are encountering as a researcher and as a teacher?

JB: I guess this is the challenge. It is a challenge taking this fellowship. It's very exciting. This is the first time I had really reflected on what I'm doing in my practice, and what am I doing as a researcher, as an architect and designer. I'm been working in the art world for the last two years. I've been working increasingly further away from the profession of architecture, mainly because of the recession that hit Europe. Young designers and architects were forced to find different avenues to express ourselves, to get paid, to eat. All of this gets jumbled up in a melting pot in Europe. So luckily I found myself in one of the two places, which are kind of the centers of that melting pot, which are Barcelona and Berlin. So what's happening in Barcelona and Berlin is that they are also the cheapest places to live in the entire Europe. They attracted so many creatives in the last few years. When you live in places that are already capitals of the world, mixed with a low standard of living, it enables creatives to go there without having to worry about working just to save money to live, or to eat. You can spend one hundred percent of your time just doing the things that you love, and exploring new things. This is how my studio was born. I found myself increasingly working with my hands. I am a builder and a carpenter, as much as an architect. I've always mixed my professional experience and my building experience. After the recession hit, I was in Edinburgh for a while, but I was invited to Barcelona. This is an important way point, because while I was at university I applied for a competition that was run by the Institute for Advanced Architecture in Catalunya. It was a pivotal moment in my life because at that moment, there was no work happening. To go to the school would have cost me forty thousand euros, and I would never have been ever to afford it. But since I was a finalist in the competition, and this was about five or six years

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later, they sent a really random email to all the finalists from all of their ever contests to apply for the very first research position within the institute. Because of my experience of being a balanced professional, I won the position.

You have to be so proactive about what you want to be, and the way that you want to shape the built environment. That's the only way that these opportunities come about. Many people consider these opportunities I've been blessed to have as luck, and there's maybe a bit of that, but then I've also been preparing for this stuff without knowing about it five or six years in advance.

GS: What direction(s) do you see the profession going?

JB: I'll continue the background story because it all becomes apparent as it comes to this point. So what we were invited to do at the school, was that we were faced with the challenge to design, fabricate, and construct the first house entirely made and produced within a fabrication laboratory and the school of architecture. These things are called fab-labs. This is kind of the cornerstone of the way that I work now. Through that project which had never been done before in an academic setting—the project was for the Solar Decathlon Europe. It was the first time done in Europe. It happens in Washington every two years. Universities compete against each other to create self-sufficient houses, or, solar houses. With that goal in mind, the school takes the opportunity to push what it means to practice in an entirely different way. We all were just discovering it together. The director of the project and the school, Vicente Gualarte, came to the University last year to teach a studio course. It wasn't because Vicente came here that I decide to look at the UMSoA

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website while forming my application, but while doing so, once I realized he had, it all started to make sense. It gave me a lot more encouragement about what I wanted to do with my research. So Vicente, and a group of seven of us, we were not just proto-typing a house, we were proto-typing a way for architects to practice. For the first time we were looking at it from the point of view, particularly from my role which is heavy in construction, and as a front end designer. In architecture I was never a project manager, or a draftsman. I designed skyscrapers and big open plans. I've always wanted to work with my hands, but I've never known how to. I've always had to choose. This was the first time I didn't have to choose. I designed something on the computer model, and then I had the fabrication laboratory right next to me, fabricate and prototype straight-away at one-to-scale, which is the most important thing. By jumping from front end design to one-to-one prototyping we cut out everything in between. The way the profession is set up, is really around the way you have to deal in the real world. We need consultants. We need tradesman, and other people. But when you do this within the fabrication lab, you don't need all of these things. You can limit the influx of tradesman and consultants by using this type of technology.

GS: What are the economic benefits of that way of working? Time management equals economy.

JB: Because everything is self-fabricated and auto-constructed, the purpose of these fab labs, which started out of MIT in the media lab, it started as a global outreach program and now there are over five hundred around the world. One of their mandates is to connect

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with local communities and put the power of production back into their hands. We talk about democratization of production through 3-d printing and other technologies. There's less of a need to engage big industry. What we are also advocating is that you can do this in the built environment. It's just a scaling thing. This is where the front line of architecture is at the moment, especially if you're a young architect. I would say that 99% of all graduate level schools around the world are pushing this at the moment. It's about how using these tools, you don't have to go to university to learn them. Now it's so accessible, that these tools are being used to teach in primary schools. There's a fab-lab just around the corner in a school West Grove where they're teaching kids in level 2 (second grade?) and upwards now, the same things that we're introducing at the university level. With this exponential growth of fab-labs around the world, you can see how this type of investigation, these types of proto-types can be shared with any of those five hundred labs because they share the same protocols to build the same things. We're looking at distributing a methodology for the design and production of the built environment. It's no longer one architect, in one office, with one client, with one project. This is a frontier that we're investigating.

The Barcelona House took us nine months from start to finish from design to set up. Everything, from the solar panels right down to the footings were made by us. Obviously we had some specialists, maybe one to three expert tradesman and consultants. We did two and a half months of pre-fabrication in the school, and then building it.

GS: Can you explain what the Barcelona house is?

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JB: It's called the FabLab House, and it was built for the Solar Decathlon Europe. It's a self-sufficient dwelling that is primarily a solar-powered house. During the competition we competed against 10 plus university around the world.

GS: Miami is an entirely different climate from Barcelona. How are you considering the vernacular and the environment for this project? How are you approaching it?

JB: I met people from around the world through the Barcelona House experience, and it opened up all of our eyes. Upon completion of the house, we immediately started talking about what the world would look like if we employed these same strategies. The idea of the house was not to do all of this stuff. We found all this out by the act of working together to make it. Since we were from many different places around the world and very young—I was about 26 years old—the world was our oyster. We understood that we had just completed a project that was profound. How could we continue to working together after going back to our own countries? How could we continue to travel? We wanted to keep travelling to each other's countries. And, what will this look like as a collective? So we started as a collective the very first years. We asked, what will this look like in this climate, where there are no clients, and with the recession in full swing? How will we find work? So, this is where the name came from. uABureau stands for unsolicited architecture, unemployed architects, urbanism and artists. It stands for a whole wealth of things, but mainly unsolicited architecture.

GS: One acronym with many meanings.

JB: Exactly. So if we ruled out the client, and we still do to this day, what does a practice look like with this exponential growth of fab labs around the world? We still are the only architecture design practice that focuses purely on this combination. Now we have a foundation set up at MIT and we work very closely with them to continue doing these proto-types. It's exciting because we continue to push the boundaries of technology with young architects and communities.

So let's rewind a little bit. As we started to travel to each other's countries, the people who were in Barcelona decided to go into academia because they thought it was important to bring the concept of the fab lab as a way of teaching. They went to places like Colombia, and other places in South America. This is where the nucleus all started. We went to Medellin, and started making workshops there to pay for our research and execute projects. Medellin, seems to be the most forward thinking city, from their library project—from putting a library in every barrio to cable cars connecting to poor neighborhoods. It was the first time I had ever been in a developing country.

As soon as I arrived we started formulating ideas. We're urbanists. We're builders. The project that really propelled us was the, a non-profit in Colombia. It started as a very small project. I saw a lot of construction waste in public spaces. We asked if every single public space and every single in-between space is a repository for construction waste, isn't there something we can do with them? By chance, my partner's friend was actually working on how to turn construction waste into cement aggregates (?). We immediately decided to put all of these ideas together. So we asked what would happen if we engaged both the materials, the people who deposit them, and the people who live around the site

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to come up with a tactical type of urbanism where we diagnose the situation and collaboratively design and plan the project together. And then, what would happen if we brought the machines from the fab labs and the material crushing machines from the warehouses to the site? What would the process then look like? That gave birth to the way that we work with and between communities, academia and industry. It's a very powerful, but fundamental arrangement of things from the built environment. Because they're all centered on the site things move very quickly. We can develop a site, build a public space within seven to ten days. The first one was twelve days. Now it's less than seven. We developed a methodology that isn't written down. It's organic.

So coming back to the market place project—these projects in Colombia were done with two workshops, and then the city of Medellin gave us a blank check to do this across the entire city at the same time. So we went from an office of four to one hundred overnight. Then we were really putting this methodology to the test. We all flew down to Medellin. We had six weeks to formulate the projects, and then seven weeks to execute it. And we did it. We did twenty-one public space projects at the same time. The organic way that we work translated to a very effective way to train teams, pull in the different communities, the different industries. You create your own informal infrastructure, but then it's not so informal once we had the city of Medellin supporting to make the project. Now this project is in El Salvador, Caracas, Mexico, Peru. It spread quite quickly. This way that we work is very much the same kind of thing that I'm bringing here to Coconut Grove. It's an informal way of working. We have a grant from a developer for the site on Douglas and Grand. The mentality here in Miami is actually very nice, because you rarely find that mentality amongst property developers and universities that are open to these

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ideas. I've met with the owners of the site and the second market place site which is in Alapattah. There's ten acres. The Douglas and Grand site is 3 by maybe 80 meters, so it's small in comparison. The developers immediately identified that this is a way to do public spaces, and public programs, from the institutional level down to the very grass roots level. It's very much about the way the communities that surround public spaces can participate in the planning and building of it. This type of planning and charrettes in place-making started in the University of Miami. The next stage of this is what Chuck and Armando see in my projects, which I never saw before. I just saw it as the way that I do things. But they see it as the next evolutionary stage of engaging the community in the physical construction of the public space. And that is key in how you build trust, investment and longevity. Now with these property developers, it's the first time I find people who are able to put their money where their mouth is about what they believe. That's really refreshing because people fought tooth and nail. This foresight is quite refreshing, and can lead to great things.

So this market place project has two sides. One side would really push the culinary experience of Coconut Grove. Have an enjoyable, outdoor, food market in the neighborhood where you can buy fresh produce, and meals and one that draws people to the neighborhood from outside. It's very much a European feeling, because we have the best markets for sure, in Europe. Chefs of the finest restaurants come first in the early morning to get their fresh produce, and then the mothers come to get their stuff, then the tourists come to eat the freshest produce being cooked on the same site. Then the afternoon rolls around, its happy hour, it's cyclical. It's the center of the neighborhood. This is the purpose of the grant to inject that into Miami by creating the Miami version of it. This is the way that I work between these different industries, academia, and communities, comes

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into play. Through the act of designing and making, and pulling these people in together, it becomes a project that's not about ballooning in something and then opening doors. I think that's very much the Miami way. Like Art Basel. It's called Basel because it came from Basel, and that's been very successful. I'm not saying that the Miami way isn't the right way to do it. There are different levels of success. But, when it comes to the long-term working with communities for developing different areas, for example Wynwood. There is some success, but there are areas that are completely dead and quite dangerous outside the immediate radius of the neighborhood. Something that advocates for community gathering places, more so than jacking up the property prices, which is kind of the method of development at the moment. I think those guys that are investing right now will have a much more valuable site in the end.

On the corner of Douglas & Grand are a series of dis-used buildings owned by the developer, which may come down, or they may just stay there. There's a huge green plot, which will be the temporary area. The temporary area will focus on food production. My research agenda focuses on the neighborhood metabolism, much the same way that I run my studio. The School brought me here because of the way that I practice, the way that I'm producing architecture, not just architects. The studios will function the way that I practice. This will be included in my research.

GS: How are you documenting the process? As a librarian I can't help but ask.

JB: Well, then you'll be happy to know that it's all about books and booklets. It's both online and print matter.

So let's double back to the start of the semester. I didn't have an opportunity to prepare anything before I came here. It started to make perfect sense to do this the way that I practice. I arrived in a new city. I knew no one. I needed to create great, new projects with my students. This is the crux of the way I practice. Lizz [Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk], the former Dean, told me to look into "Parking Day Miami", for which the community meeting was happening the very next day. This is exactly the way that I practice—get a tip, go to the community meeting, and luckily they were well-organized. I met with the organizers and told them about my idea for having students work on it, and they were very supportive. So, the second time I met with students, I told them that we're going to start with a design-build project at the very, very start, because this is how we've been working, and then we're going to work backwards. We're going to work through the design-build, then we're going to do drawings, and publish the materials. I threw a lot of things at them from the start, they threw their trust in me. We just went into it, ten days, the exact same time-frame as what we do as seasoned, design-build professionals in public spaces. They made three *parklets* in several neighborhoods. They were asked to engage local businesses as well, so they had to find a parking space in front of a local business. They were immediately being taught how to work collaboratively. I facilitated a lot, but they had to do all the grunt work. I went in to explain the design build program and seal the deal with the business owners. So the business that worked with us curated the program that happened inside their parklets. While they did the parklets they published everything on Instagram for the whole project. They're engaging the local businesses who are giving sometimes time and money to the project. They're engaging the wider network of Miami-Dade county, and the Parks and Recreation Department. So by this act of designing and

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building first, and using social media to get the word out there, that's a more effective way of getting the ideas of what they're doing across. And, afterwards we do the architecture stuff, the drawings.

GS: Are you getting personal satisfaction out of working with these students?

JB: Definitely, I think they're great students. They ended up winning the first prize. They won "Best Parklet" in Miami. The good thing is that everything that I've been saying is slowly being validated. I think it's quite funny that I met with the guy that built the parking structure on South Beach, the very fancy one,

GS: The Herzog & DeMeuron parking lot?

JB: yeah that one, and he even he knew about the parklets. The way that he built that project is on the same premise, obviously on a different scale. It's a structure that's about public space and program, but when it's not being used as public space it's a parking space that generates income. He curates all different, temporary public activities inside that structure. So, without even knowing about this sort of stuff happening, it's by the act of doing something, at one to one, in an urban scale that all these things fit together. The validation of my research and the way that I practice is evident in the way that you build things. I think that the act of building is the catalyst, and there's different ways of building, or different ways of constructing our built environment. Whether temporary or permanent, or semi-permanent structures like the market. That type of architecture is a much more

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habitable development for the city than all the hotels that are being commissioned at the moment.

GS: Where do you place the relevance of the library in the type of research that you do and in your practice?

JB: The Library is the archetypical public space for meeting and gathering. I think the challenge for the library is exactly this--how to stay relevant. The only way to do that is to engage in the front line of students who are becoming architects. A lot of arguments are made for big public libraries as big impressive landmarks for cities. But we're talking about 1% of libraries around the world.

It's very much a social issue. All of these things that we're doing now in public space, we consider ourselves urbanists, but also this is how we entered the game. We have always seen the way that we work as applicable to all types of public spaces, whether it's within a building or outside of it. We really believe in this thing that Chuck [Bohl] calls the *third place*, where everything outside of home or work is the public domain. It's the *commons*. And the commons is what I'm challenging students to design here in Miami. We're trying to define public space typologies. If they're not within your actual living and working area, it's open season and can be classified as the commons. How that is legible in terms of the library is very important because we have these classical models that will never die. I really believe that libraries and the people who operate them are challenged with the same things as the property developers are here in Miami. You're challenging this typology of public space and involving the community to give some sort of legibility

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to the city. When I say legibility, I don't so much mean credibility, but it's being legible about what your intentions really are. The few property developers that I've come into contact with through the market-place program have very good intentions for the community. The library is a similar thing. It's very clear you guys are furnishing a social need, and you have the best intentions, but how effective and legible is that from a holistic point of view?

GS: How can the library here at UM (the architecture library) support your research and teaching needs?

JB: For me now, I'm learning on the job. This the first time I'm academically trying to pull together my research. The result of my fellowship will be a publication, for sure. It's something that I've wanted to do for a long time. What exactly that is, is all being researched right now. I'm not sure. Most likely it could be an alternative guide book to Miami, like a soft atlas to these commons and public spaces. I think we would need the library's cooperation to help in the research of bibliographies and readings available.

There's no point in publishing a book and having no support to continue the research. It's about stockpiling books published by similar thinking architects at the moment who are really looking at public spaces in a different role. If we get students thinking more about the role of public buildings and spaces and how they're being developed and represented through art and illustration. Holland is the most forward thinking of all the centers. The library participated in one of the architectural conferences, and it was really the meeting of the minds. Book research is not really my thing. I follow

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my contemporaries and whatever books they recommend, that's as far as it goes. Now I see that it's really important to have activities run by libraries that reinforce their role as a public institution. I think that's more direct. Not so much a reading club for hotels, but it could be incorporated into a design competitions of libraries and their roles within the city. At the University of Miami, the one thing that I've noticed is that people have similar thoughts and ideas, but they're not working together. This market place project is a fantastic project—a catalyst for many different departments and people to work together to produce something. That's what I'd like to see happen at the school, from the production side and the research side. That's my challenge at the moment. I'm trying to integrate the research and the production. I have a few pivotal texts that I have students read to fuse into their studio work. I'm giving upper-level studios the most fundamental tasks, but there is no culture in place from the very first year about how to do things. The University has lost its role. It's just a shell to pass through, pick up a book, go to a class, and then ciao! I think production, studio culture, and the library should be integrated from the first year. You should be able to go to the library and have enough group classrooms for groups to meet together. My students can't do group work. I have to spoon feed them tasks.

Now they're building a new studio building. Who knows what's in store, but from what I've heard, it's very much like the Harvard GSD building model.

At the end of the day, the by-product of a school of architecture is graduating students, but it's primary product is the school itself. We need to create facilities that are far superior than what's already out there.

People judge the school by the laboratories and the libraries should be a part of that. The fab-lab that we made was a productive center/space. One of the research agendas in

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my studio is productive spaces. It's split into four research agendas. There's integrative fabrication, the people who make up the place, interactive technologies, and the last is productive spaces. When we get invited to do these types of projects, we almost always have to create our own productive space to produce our projects. There are no existing spaces out there that meet our needs—hardly ever. Even in Barcelona, when I left the school, I couldn't find a space for myself to work and where I could meet with people. So, I created Barcelona's first maker space. It's still the first community owned and operated space in all of Barcelona. Maker spaces and co-working spaces are the biggest business models in Europe at the moment, which is fine, but that was not my goal. I appreciate the other founders with me who continued on, and it worked beautifully.

As a young architect, I've learned these things from the need to produce a built environment. I don't have a place to work, I just create a place to work. I don't have a place to build, I have to create my own place to build. Well, how do I do that? I can't afford it. I collaborate. I work with industry. I work with academia. I work with people in the community.

GS: Is it your intention to make these working spaces permanent or temporary?

JB: So the maker space in Barcelona is definitely permanent. Sometimes they serve as a catalyst for the school to join a fab lab network and it becomes a formalized thing. At this school, we have all the pieces here. My specialty is taking all those pieces and putting them together. The Dean has given me permission to do that here. The fab foundation in Boston do work abroad, but they're looking to do more stuff in the states because that's where they

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have their funding stream. Sometimes the temporary space is set up just for the execution of the project and later collapsed. More often than not, it actually gets translated into the actual space that we design.

I'm very careful to use the word, but it's still fresh in my mind, but it's like a reproductive architecture. How can a place give birth to another place? How can a production center give birth to another reproductive center? It's a production place that creates more production space. It's like recreating the womb many, many times, and then whoever joins the party...

I use words like metabolism and reproduction a lot because I think it's our basic instinct to do these things, not fight against them. When we talk about self-sufficiency and sustainability—I really don't like to use sustainable because it really means nothing anymore—it's over-used. For things to become self-sufficient, it's about how these independent things work interdependently as a system. That's exactly the way that our bureau works. We're about 10 or 12 people around the world who are components working independently, but together as an interdependent body.

If you think about how fab labs can work in actually building a library, or enforcing library culture by building library spaces. I don't mean the interior design of library spaces. Think about the how the libraries in Medellin worked. We worked with the libraries when we did that project. We did a public space in every barrio and pulled the libraries into it as meeting places because these were the only places with access to computers. In one of the libraries we actually created a temporary space in their courtyard in which all the kids were just going in to play video games. OK, so how do turn this on its head a bit, and turn the video game and the public space into a learning environment. They learned basic

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interactive technologies through their video games and then playing it through different devices for which they had to learn physical computing. It turned a big reflecting pool into a three dimensional space.

I would like to do more stuff like this. The [architecture] library at UM, for example, could expand a temporary space into the courtyard. Instead of the library reaching out to the studios, it could be the other way around and used as a catalyst that would enforce the position of the library.

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