



Episode 1: Inclusive Public Spaces

Michelle: Hi, I'm Michelle Fenton, and welcome to the Happitecture Podcast.

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Michelle: What would it take to develop resilient, sustainable communities? How do we design cities that support our collective happiness? Join me as my guests and I discuss how we can plan, implement, and foster places that allow us to flourish and grow.

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Michelle: Okay, welcome to the first episode of Happitecture, the Happitecture Podcast. I am delighted to be with my first guest, Danielle Wiley, senior public space planner at the City of Vancouver. Danielle, welcome.

Danielle: Thank you so much, it is wonderful to be here.

Michelle: Well we go back a long way, and so this is why it's such a special treat for me to have you kick off this podcast. We're really here to talk about public space. You being the senior planner at the City of Vancouver. The city is doing quite a tremendous amount of work and putting quite a bit of effort and resources into making our public space more beautiful, more accessible to all. So, it's great to have you here to talk about this topical issue right now, and maybe we should just start with – Well let's start with your role at the city and what you and your team do, and how that helps fulfill what the city's mandate on public space is.

Danielle: Sure, so I'm part of a relatively new group at the city in the public space and street use division. And so, I as a senior public space planner was brought on to form a team that oversees, on the one hand, our plaza and public space stewardship, so that's taking care of, managing, operating, and programming public spaces on the one hand, and on the other hand, looking at our VIVA Program, which is activating public space. That's really our tactical urbanism group where we get the public involved, and community organizations involved in doing events and activations in public space to amplify public life and participation.

Michelle: Well certainly it's become a little bit more – I'm not sure how long your team has been operating, but – certainly the activation part has been a lot more visible in the city recently, certainly from my perspective. There must have been quite an uptake on it for it to start. It seems to be building momentum in the city.

Danielle: It absolutely is, and it reflects a very deliberate investment on our part in supporting the program and forming a team around it.

Michelle: Great. Well, I hope you don't mind but I'd love to get a little – switch gears a little bit to the personal journey. I mean you're quite passionate about your involvement in this program and I know you've recently started this with this group of the city. Your journey has, in a very seemingly constructed way even –

[Michelle and Danielle laugh]

Danielle: I don't know if it's constructed.

Michelle: Let me explain. It seems like there was – there's a momentum there. There's a purpose there that's always been there. Do you mind talking about that a little bit?

Danielle: Sure! I mean, this is a funny question for us, because of course we had a long history. We met in architecture school.

Michelle: Oh my.

Danielle: I want to say 25 years ago.

Michelle: Yes.

[Michelle and Danielle laugh]

Danielle: So, my background is in architecture, and I practiced in architecture for several years and my interest started to drift from buildings and details and construction –

Michelle: Well, you even did your PHD on public space, right?

Danielle: Exactly!

Michelle: So, there's always been that yearning, that purpose –

Danielle: Exactly, because it started to switch from the building to the bigger picture.

Michelle: Right.

Danielle: And so, I started to become more interested in public space and urban planning, and so I switched gears out of practicing architecture into doing my PHD. And that was partly driven through my education.

I lived in Italy for a while. I lived in Rome for a few years, and there I was working on plazas with some of our projects but I was also just in the eternal city looking at their incredible public realm, and that started to be really interesting to me.

So, when I went into my PHD, I started to look at neighborhoods and specifically the public space armature in different master plan neighborhoods. And the master – the case studies I looked at were neighborhoods around False Creek in Vancouver.

Michelle: Well that's telling!

Danielle: Exactly, and so that ended up being what spring-boarded me into coming to work at the City of Vancouver.

Michelle: And let's just go back and let our audience know that you didn't – you're not from Vancouver.

Danielle: No, I'm from a very small town in Ontario that does not have –

[Michelle and Danielle laugh]

Danielle: – the kinds of public spaces that you have in a city and where you just don't have the need for it.

Michelle: Yeah.

Danielle: It's just such a different world, but going through architecture and having experience of living in cities really fed my passion for urban life and the way that outdoor space is used by a community. Yeah, so coming to the City of Vancouver, I did spend my time for the first eight years in the planning department, which makes a lot of sense with an architecture background.

Michelle: Yeah.

Danielle: Looking at developments, but my interest in working with private development was always that interface of the public realm. So how the building can be generous and gracious to the public realm and frame the public space that – the city you know – that streams the city life.

Michelle: Yeah.

Danielle: That's what I always saw as my role as a civil servant, is thinking about the public benefit. And so, it was a for me a really natural then, move over to the engineering department in the public space, because that just has kind of narrowed my focus on that public health.

Michelle: Wonderful. Well, when I say constructed, I mean perhaps it was a pull towards where you are right now, because the journey doesn't seem to – even though you've had a few changes of course a little bit here and there, the journey seems to have a very direct purpose, is what I really meant to say.

[Michelle and Danielle laugh]

Michelle: Well, let's take a step back and look at why does the city think public space matters. That's a big question.

Danielle: It is. Why does public space matter? Well, our team is super passionate about this issue and it's something that we think about a lot. And public space for us is really multifaceted. It is the living room

and the backyard of the public. It is the site of public life. It's where different groups of people will come together deliberately and sometimes accidentally.

Michelle: Yeah.

[Michelle and Danielle laugh]

Danielle: And that's what makes it really exciting. And it has a traditional purpose as being really fundamental to democracy, in that they're spaces where we can have peaceful expression, political demonstrations, public expression. It's related to our charter rights and freedoms. And it's places where different groups can come and express their culture, express their political beliefs and express themselves.

At the same time it also fulfills a really important function just for social gatherings, so whether it's small and large groups, it's just a place where you meet your friend, it's a place where you might join in larger gatherings where we have concerts, where we have public events, free public programming as these are meant to be accessible to all, which is a really important part of just having a lively public life and it's particularly important in the city.

Michelle: Yeah.

Danielle: Where we don't have large backyards where we might be gathering casually in those ways, so this is really where people are concentrated together, are able to share space outside together.

Michelle: Mhmm.

Danielle: It's also a really important place for our marginalized communities, and this is also where we see people engaging in subsistence spending, where if you don't have a home or if you don't have a way of supporting yourself, often you're spending a lot more of your day in public space. And it might be – and it is part of a different level of the economy where there are vending activities that people are surviving on. And so, it's something for us to be really mindful of is that public space is available to all groups, and we have to find ways to navigate the different needs and uses of public space for all of these different groups.

Michelle: Absolutely, and that's where the task of developing public space that's for all in the public good, quotations, becomes really nuanced. Because you use – oftentimes in the space like that you'd have conflicting requirements or conflicting ideas of how a public space should be used.

Danielle: For sure, and I actually think that public space is important to that purpose and that will serve democracy, is that to a degree you do want the conflict. And that we don't want – [laughs]

Michelle: Homogeneous –

Danielle: We don't want riots, but we do want friction, and public space is a really important space where we get to rub against people who are different from us. And sometimes that can be uncomfortable, sometimes it can be inspiring, sometimes it can be challenging. And I think that's a really healthy important function in a society.

Michelle: Well certainly you see when the city becomes more dense, more diverse, the requirement for having space that is safe, culturally safe, and also from a personal safety point of view becomes a lot more important because the ideals of one group – cultural group may not necessarily play out as comfortably with another social group.

Danielle: Mhmm.

Michelle: And the scale of those public spaces and how they're programmed or not programmed becomes a really critical issue of how they're designed.

Danielle: For sure, and that's why I think it's very important to have an ecology of public spaces, and that no single public space is going to be able to accommodate all uses of all groups within the community. But ideally every person in the community can find a public space where they can go and be and be comfortable, so that we're not asking too much of one space. You need the large spaces that are regionally centered that everyone can gather in, but you also need the smaller local neighborhood spaces where a smaller community might have more of a sense of ownership and expression.

Michelle: Well, we touch a little bit on some of the direct incentives that the city is partaking in and starting to implement. Can you expand a little bit on that? Let's –

Danielle: Sure! There are a couple really important initiatives that I'd love to touch on, and one is called "Places for People" – the Downtown public space strategy that is currently in process and is going to be completed this year. That's our target.

Michelle: That's a big task.

Danielle: It is a big task. That is looking at the whole public space network, a large vision of it, for the Downtown peninsula over the next 30 years. So, it is a bird's eye high level strategy for – how do we deliver a complete public space network in Downtown and in the context of we have a growing population and so we have this densifying Downtown where our public spaces are more and more of a premium, and we have a limited ways of – being on a peninsula – of building more spaces.

And at the same time, they need to serve more and more functions than ever before as we are having a densifying city and people are living in smaller places. More of our life is taking place in these public spaces and we have more need of them. So that's a really important strategy, and some of the directions that are coming out of that are that public – or principles I should say – are that public space should be for all and by all. And what that basically means is that everyone has to be welcome in public space, but also the by all component is that we want people to participate in the planning, design, creation, and also stewardship of public spaces so that different community groups have more of a sense of ownership over their use and over the events that are taking place in them. So that's one important direction. Another important direction is looking at different public spaces fulfilling different functions. So, we call it the right supply, meaning that in a complete healthy public space network:

You want spaces that are contemplative and restful. You want spaces that are more active for social gathering, for commercial activity. You want spaces that are large for events and celebration and for civic expression. You want spaces that are for play – and play does not just mean for playgrounds for children. We want to be thinking of play as something that is for everyone, where there might be sort of whimsical features that are incorporated into our sidewalk spaces, into our parks and plazas so that people of all

ages can have a bit of whimsy and activity and surprise, and that being something that helps fuel public life as well.

Michelle: Well, I mean, just the visual of that, when you actually take a little bit of a pause and think about public space that can accommodate happenstance. You know, I mean we're getting into a really almost in the federal realm of design and public space. That there needs to be a deliberate construct but at the same time, there's a looseness to it, that this – the happenstance can actually unfold, and those everyday rituals become richer for it.

Danielle: Exactly.

Michelle: Yeah, that's brilliant. So, in terms of – I was just looking at the UN Happiness Report that came out. Canada is ranked ninth, which is – continues to be – I think when you think about Canadian public space, it's not something we're known for. I mean, the Europeans have always been a little bit ahead of the game. Quite a bit ahead of the game when it comes to not just designing public space, but embracing public space as part of their cultural identity.

And so, in terms of the indicators for a healthy public space which it might be a little bit of a stretch to say healthy happy public space, what you see are some of the key indicators of what is the city tracking?

Danielle: If I had to think about some indicators or features of a healthy public space, I think the first one is that a given public space, we have to have a clearly defined idea of what its role is within that complete public space network. Meaning is it one of the spaces that's meant to be more active, meant to be more social and a space for gathering, or is it meant to be a more of a local, restful, quiet contemplative space. And so, once you have its role defined within the network, then that will give you ideas of how it should be programmed, how it should be designed, how it should be stewarded, and how it should be supported. So, I think that's really, really important, is to understand that different spaces perform differently, and that's a positive thing.

Another really important indicator is; how inclusive is this space? And inclusive to me means, first of all, that it can accommodate multiple groups. We were talking a little bit earlier about the friction between different groups. We want to be able to accommodate that. So, a healthy public space, I think, can accommodate different users coming in for different reasons, and different sorts of programming, so it has a certain flexibility.

Inclusive, to me, also means that it is welcoming to different kinds of groups. And in some cases that actually means that there needs to be a group that's involved either in the stewardship or even in the design so that they have a sense of investment and representation. Like I'm thinking of an example of including our First Nations communities. There needs to be some spaces in the city that are really theirs, that are spaces where they can express their culture, and where they can participate in their culture, potentially share it with other community groups, or potentially just – not that they would never have exclusive use, but that it might be more focused –

Michelle: That's right.

Danielle: – on their cultural histories and on their current culture. So, I think that's an important part of inclusivity as well, is having moments in our public space network where different communities can really have ownership and self-representation.

Michelle: Well I mean to go back to the thought that, you know, if when, on the surface when you hear something like that you think, "well this is an exclusive space", but if you think about a network of public space, and the idea that a space is designed for a specific group but can be shared by all, is also a demonstration of the strength and vitality of that particular cultural group.

Danielle: For sure.

Michelle: So, it's also a space where the public can be educated as to how this group functions, what's important to them, you know, what's being – what's current in their cultural sphere and their experience.

Danielle: Exactly, and somewhat related to this, I think a final feature is that a public space needs to be welcoming, and in order to be welcoming, it needs to be safe.

Michelle: That's right.

Danielle: Exactly, and so that safety doesn't just necessarily mean, for example, brightly lit.

Michelle: Right.

Danielle: Because that can make some people in the community feel quite unsafe or under a spotlight. Traditionally, our public spaces have tended to attract a fairly narrow demographic of the population; kind of a 20 to 45-year-old range of able-bodied people. And so, we need to start expanding that, to have our spaces feel welcoming and safe for families with small children, for seniors, for women, and for persons with disabilities. And so, we need to think about really focusing on those different groups' needs and perceptions of space from the very beginning of design, all the way through programming and operations.

Michelle: So really, we're talking about a strategic actionable plan, as opposed to, "what are we going to do with this leftover space?"

Danielle: You know –

Michelle: I mean, let's be fair, the public space in Canada has – except for perhaps in the 50s and 60s when large plazas were planned with no program whatsoever, no edges. You know, it's pretty much left us – "here, we have some space, let's just plant some things" or you know, some benches. So, you're talking about a really intensive design exercise from beginning to end.

Danielle: For sure, and we have to be –

Michelle: Engagement components.

Danielle: Mhmm. Public engagement is very important in that, if you do public engagement early, you also have an opportunity to identify groups within the community that might be interested in taking the space on, and really begin to be engaged in "owning" it over the long term. I use "owning" in quotation marks of course it is open to all.

Michelle: Stewardship.

Danielle: Stewardship, exactly. A sense of belonging and involvement in the space. And so public engagement is also so important for matching the design of the space to the community that is there to receive it.

Michelle: Mhmm. Well that that gets me back to the idea of the VIVA Program, because that is specifically targeted for this interaction, that's the stakeholder engagement in a very short frame. So, can we expand a little bit on the initiatives and the actual process for the VIVA Program?

Danielle: Yes. As I mentioned our favorite program is our tactical urbanism group. So, what that means is that it – this is where we have an opportunity to incubate and innovate new ideas for public space, and so, what that can look like is perhaps we come across an opportunity for a new public space where transportation is going to be reallocating from road space, or changing some traffic routes. Where we can take over, say, a block to become a plaza, to convert it from "Pavement-to-Plazas" we call it. So, rather than imposing the design from above, what we'll often do in a situation like that is that we'll work with the VIVA team to test out early ideas for what that space could be, and to use that on the ground testing as a public engagement process. So, we'll get out there set up some temporary features – tables, chairs, umbrellas, platforms, you know, potentially some temporary stages, piano for example – and start to invite people into the space and see how they respond to that configuration, and give them opportunities to say "yes they want this", "no they don't like that", work with local businesses; is this plaza going to support their business or are there ways that we can help it to do so. We can see who's coming into the plaza and maybe who isn't, so how can we adjust the design to relate to different community groups who might be not accessing – not be pre-accessing our public spaces. And we can have an iterative process where, perhaps the following summer we do a second version of it and start to refine the design, so that by the time you get to a final design, you've built a community around the space, but you've also really tested the design parameters so that the space is going to be as successful as possible.

Michelle: Yeah.

Danielle: So that's one thing that VIVA does. Another innovative program that VIVA does is that it runs activations often through design competitions. So, we will post a design competition online and disseminate it through our networks that invite community groups and individuals from the public to engage in a design project that might be – for example, this year we did our "Life Between Umbrellas" design competition.

Michelle: Right, yeah.

Danielle: So, we were inviting people to think about activations that can happen on the rainy season. Because as you know, during the winter it rains a lot and people are not in public space.

Michelle: Yeah.

Danielle: So, what events can we do that will draw people out, what temporary installations can we do that will bring people up, whether they be shelters or lighting installations that would make spaces more friendly for people during the rainy season. And so, the benefit of a competition like that is it gets people's impact for what they want to do in public space, gets people's input. And it also gets a conversation started around public space and in this case, in the winter.

Michelle: Yeah.

Danielle: And so that's a way of really involving people and bringing out their ideas. We'll often host parties and public events to showcase the winning entries or to see – sometimes even just all the entries so people get to see the depths and breadth of ideas coming out of our community. And finally, we will select winning entrance, and we will do some of those activations.

So, we'll fund a community group to do the activation and that is building capacity in communities that they can do things in the future. We'll also be funding a design build, so one community group who wins this category of the competition will actually work with them to build their installation in the temporary plaza. And again, that's investing in communities so that it's not just us who are making public space. It's really coming from the grassroots.

Michelle: Yeah, well I mean when you – let's maybe put some examples out there, because some people might have a bit of a disconnect between the actual program and some of the spaces that they probably interact with every day.

Danielle: Mhmm.

Michelle: So, what are some of the results of the VIVA program?

Danielle: Oh, so some of the some of the activations that we've supported have been the Public Disco series right that are taking place in a variety of spaces around Vancouver over the summer whether – you know – one's in an alley called Alley-Oop, one was under the Cambie Bridge, an example of a rain-friendly space. Another really successful program that VIVA has funded is in Chinatown in Memorial Plaza where it's just a matter of supporting ping-pong tables and mahjong. And that's – you know – that really relates to that community.

Michelle: Yeah.

Danielle: And that is supporting a Chinatown youth collective

Michelle: Right.

Danielle: So again, we're supporting groups that are within the communities to define what programming works for their public spaces.

Michelle: Yeah. I mean, again we go back to the idea that the public space often, well, in the past it's sort of a bird's-eye view top-down imposition. And we're talking about a totally different approach to public space. You know, when we talk about public space from the grassroots, we're also talking about scale, right? Human scale and how important it is to actually start to reflect the human scale back into public spaces to make them more activated, more friendly, more comfortable.

Danielle: Exactly, and VIVA isn't always just about the parties either. Another program that we fund that I think is really important is called "Good Night Out", and what that is, is that it's a stewardship program for the Granville Street night nightlife district where volunteers or people you know earning just an honorary and go out between midnight and 2 a.m. and they are stewards for the night life, basically. Making sure

that people who perhaps are intoxicated make their way to a bus or a cab, de-escalating potential conflicts, offering water, and kind of the subtext of this is also that it supports anti-sexual harassment initiatives. So, it's supporting women and other potentially more vulnerable people who are participating in nightlife to make sure that they're safe, then that is a good night for everyone.

Michelle: Yeah, which hits squarely on the third aspect of good public space you mentioned is public safety –

Danielle: Welcoming.

Michelle: And yeah, and making that that safety as broad as possible for as many different sectors in society, many different aspects of enjoying the public life possible.

Danielle: Mhmm.

Michelle: Well that, you know, I didn't realize that the Granville Street initiative was part of the VIVA mandate. That's pretty incredible. You guys should actually advertise that a little.

[Michelle and Danielle laugh]

Michelle: Well, we talked quite a bit about what makes good public space. So, how are we measuring this? How are we – what tools are we going to use to start measuring this and quantify it?

Danielle: That is such an interesting question, and it's something that our group is really grappling with in these past few years, I would say. In that traditionally we would use quite empirical tools to measure how we're doing public space. For example, each year, how many square feet or square meters of public space are we adding to the public space network? And that's important because we do need to make sure that we're keeping a certain – we want to target having a certain amount for residence.

Another way that we would measure public space is pedestrian counts; how many people are coming through plaza in peak season and low season and daytime and night time. If it's plummeting at night, perhaps there's some lighting issues. If it's plummeting in the winter, you know, maybe we do need to look at some off-season programming.

So that has been helpful, but a new strategy that we've been taking in the past couple of years is looking at happiness metrics, and working with an organization called Happy City to help us measure more qualitative experiences of public space that include – and these are generally done through intercept surveys so we speak to people in plazas that might be passing through or might be sitting and staying and asking them, for example, in this plaza if you dropped your wallet, how likely do you think it would be that someone would return it to you? If you saw a piece of litter, how likely would you be to put it in litter bin yourself?

Michelle: Interesting.

Danielle: Exactly. Would you come back here and meet a friend again? How often do you use this plaza? So really starting to look at people's experience, their sense of ownership over it, a sense of safety, again their sense of enjoyment. And we're finding that that research should be really useful in terms of understanding the work that we do, and where we're going, right? And where we might need course correction. And what's really inspiring is that we're funding as we're moving this research, you know, up

the chain, is that the senior management really has a lot of buy-in and sees the value. And measuring public space this way isn't just about square feet

Michelle: Yeah. And data, stats.

Danielle: And data, but really looking at measurable, quantifiable, but still qualitative aspects of public space.

Michelle: Well that's an interesting aspect of measuring happiness, and the factors that are associated with that are becoming really interesting and a more popular way of not just measuring things in an open space, but work-life balance, about, you know, socio-economic issues. Those factors are starting – those non-quantifiable factors are starting to become really important measures for all aspects of social life. So, it makes sense that they would be one of the top criteria in measuring public space.

Danielle: Absolutely. And if I would just add, I would say happiness can be a hard question to ask.

Michelle: Absolutely.

Danielle: Because it tends to be fleeting experience. So, when we're designing these questions with what happens to our partner, is often the focus is on well-being. Because well-being is a more of a constant state, whereas happiness, you could be asking the person about the mood as they walk in and out of the space.

Michelle: Thanks for the clarification.

Danielle: For sure. And so, I find that a useful frame, and what can help us measure it, is that often we'll take a similar block that doesn't have a plaza in it that's, you know, one street over, versus the block that's been converted to a plaza. And we'll ask people about their experiences in both of those spaces, in terms, again, of their sense of well-being. Do you feel safe? Do you feel again that you would want to come here? Would you meet a friend here? Would you come again? Would you –

Michelle: Right. Are you comfortable, do you feel nurtured by your environment?

Danielle: Exactly.

Michelle: Yeah that's incredible, I mean –

Danielle: And we have found that for our plazas, the metrics are very good.

Michelle: Yeah.

Danielle: We have found that there's a big difference between the control site and the plaza.

Michelle: Well, I'd love to have you back just to talk about that alone because that's a huge topic and we could probably spend quite a bit of time talking about that. Well let's maybe switch gears a little bit, and talk about how citizens can actually engage in the programs that you have. Where do they find this information, how can they connect with the city to have their voices heard?

Danielle: Absolutely. So first off, I would say the most basic way is to go to our webpage. We do have a public space landing page on the City of Vancouver website that connects to all of our programs. Whether the programs be street horticulture and beautification, or whether it be some of the public space activation programs that I was talking about through VIVA, the design competitions. As well as just information about our plazas and events that might be happening there. So, I'd really encourage people to check that out.

Michelle: Great. What's the – let's do a plug for the website. It's Vancouver.ca.

Danielle: Vancouver.ca and then if you look – if you put in the search bar "public space" you're right to the landing page.

Michelle: Great. I'm going to check it out as soon as we're wrapped up here.

Danielle: Thank you. And other ways to engage; please absolutely participate in our public space engagements. Like for example, for the Places for People public space strategy that we're doing, we had two years of public engagements where we've done observational public life studies a little. Also, a lot of open houses in public spaces to try to get people's feedback about the strategy. And so please participate in those. Other ways to participate are to access us through the VIVA Program, where you as a resident or as a community organization can come out and pitch to us on activation for public space or participate in one of our design competitions, so that you can get involved more directly. And if you're not involved, then come and attend the events.

Michelle: Not just the disco.

Danielle: Not just the disco.

[Michelle and Danielle laugh]

Danielle: All of the events.

Michelle: Great. I think we're all – knowing your work – I think we're all really grateful to have you at the city. And really, you and your team focusing and putting such a great effort on public space. Because I do – personally do think it's important. And we do see how the City of Vancouver is – or how we use public space in the City of Vancouver actually changing. Since I've moved here, I don't know, 17 years ago, 18 years ago.

Danielle: I agree. I think it's become a lot more vibrant.

Michelle: We're expecting better quality public space as a citizenship.

Danielle: We expect more, and we should continue to demand more from our public spaces.

Michelle: Wonderful. Well, hopefully we get a lot of people visiting the website and being more engaged in public space, because it is for all of us. And I wanted to say thanks again for being here and being my first guest. I'm sure through the podcast series we'll probably have you back to talk more specifically. I know it's a short time. It's hard to get all the details and nuances of public life and public space into, you know,

20 minutes or so, but thank you for being succinct. But it's still really engaging and being willing to talk to us about public space.

Danielle: Well, thank you so much for having me. It's an honor to be your first guest.

Michelle: Thanks Danielle.

[music]

Michelle: For more information on this or any other episodes of the Happitecture Podcast, you can find us at happitecture.com. h-a-p-p-i-t-e-c-t-u-r-e dot com.

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