

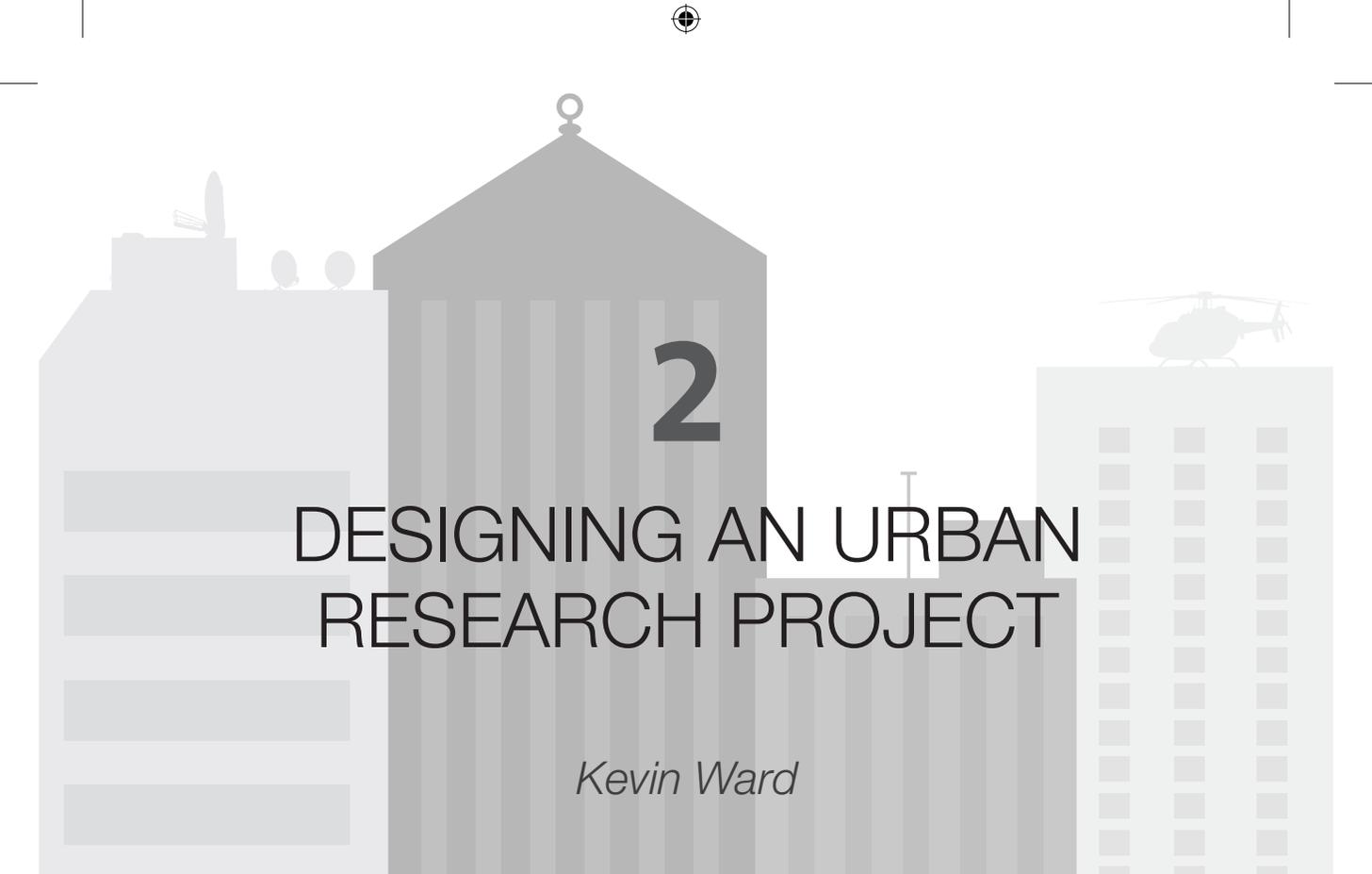
# RESEARCHING THE CITY

edited by

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# 2

## DESIGNING AN URBAN RESEARCH PROJECT

*Kevin Ward*

Don't leave it too late: your life will be a total misery.

The dissertation was where I really got to pursue my own interests and not those of the lecturers.

You realize how hard it is to study things properly.

### Introduction

It was with these three unattributed quotes that I would begin the dissertation support classes I used to deliver in Geography at the University of Manchester. They were comments final year students made to me *after* they had completed and submitted their dissertations. Only then, when reflecting back on the whole dissertation process, did they appreciate quite what had been involved, both intellectually and personally. I would also invite one or two final year students into my lectures, to get them to talk to the second year students about the importance of the dissertation and the need to plan in advance. Hearing from students who had literally just finished their dissertation was a welcome addition to having someone like me standing in front of the students. Or, that was what the feedback sheets told me! After all, and as I used to say regularly to my students, a dissertation does not design or manage itself. While

this may seem obvious, nevertheless, there is a need for you to acknowledge early on in the research process that producing a dissertation will test not only your intellectual ability; this is something the staff or faculty at your own institution will stress I am sure. Your capacity to manage, organize and plan will also be important if you are to deliver your dissertation on time. An important first step in preparing yourself to produce a dissertation is acknowledging that as a project it consists of different but connected elements. This should make the dissertation seem less daunting. If you are worried – as many students are – about producing a dissertation of anything between 10,000 and 20,000 words then breaking it down into smaller mini-projects should allay some of your fears. Hopefully you will be aware of some, if not all, of the elements from the dissertation support classes provided by your own institution. The main ones are the reviewing of existing academic literature and the generating of research questions; the planning and designing of the research; the gathering, generating and analysing of data; and the writing up of the dissertation. However, do not be fooled by the way they are listed here. You do not do one, tick a box and then move on. Each of these elements is interrelated and they are revisited a number of times while you are producing your dissertation. You will be reviewing the existing academic literature almost up to the day you hand in your dissertation, while writing it is not something that should get left to the last minute (see Chapter 11, this volume). Indeed, as soon as you start making notes to yourself about possible topics, or writing down keywords based on the work of academics, you are officially ‘writing’ your dissertation!

This chapter provides a very short overview of the process of designing an urban research project. There are a number existing social science textbooks that take the reader through a research project, such as a dissertation. These are worth turning to if you want more details of any of the different stages (Smith et al. 2009; Walliman 2004). This chapter takes you quickly through the different elements up to what you do with the data you have generated. It gives you a flavour of the sorts of issues you should be thinking about as you design your dissertation. These apply to most if not all types of dissertations, and thus this chapter provides a general set of comments before the following eight chapters turn to different ways of studying the city, and the specific issues this raises. The final chapter turns to what you do with your data once you have generated it and how you write through your dissertation, pulling together all the different elements into a coherent document of which you can be proud.

## Planning your dissertation

A dissertation is an intellectual project. In the raft of textbooks that have been produced for students like you a great deal of emphasis is placed on the intellectual element, in terms of the dissertation’s theoretical content, its contribution to knowledge and its empirical findings. That is not surprising. Most of the contributions are written by those trained in disciplines in which issues of

theory, philosophy and methods are standard fare. Likewise, in my experience, the sort of dissertation support you will receive at your own institution will focus largely, but not exclusively, on the intellectual bit. However, it is also important to acknowledge that your dissertation is a project, and as such, requires planning – and the use of ‘planning’ here refers to the listing and ordering of the various aspects of the dissertation, and the informed assessment of the potential risks of each and how these risks will be either negated or managed. Universities increasingly require anyone conducting research to complete ethics and risk assessment documentation. Yours is unlikely to be any different. The paperwork is time-consuming but important and time should be taken on its completion. However, here we are talking about ‘risk’ more broadly. It refers to anything that may or may not happen when you – the student – need it to happen as part of the dissertation process. These can be very ordinary and mundane things, such as having to wait to get hold of a book that someone else has taken out of the library. Alternatively, it can be more important, such as not knowing who to interview in order to answer your research questions, or, having identified who you need to speak to, not being able to convince them to give up their time to meet you.

When you list and order the different elements of the dissertation it is important that you think about sequence and size, before moving on to risks. Put simply, not all the things on the list you produce will take the same amount of time! You need to think about the labour involved at each of the four main stages of the dissertation, probably breaking down each element into sub-elements and begin attaching a time to each. That makes the production of timelines easier. So, how will you go about pulling together the various literatures you want/need to read? How will you generate a questionnaire or an interview schedule? How will you analyse your material? How long will each of these take and what are the risks associated with each? These are the sorts of question you need to ask yourself as you begin to plan your dissertation; they are important as they may make some dissertations less or more appropriate, given the expectations of your own institution.

According to Ragin (1994: 191):

Research design is a plan for collecting and analyzing evidence that will make it possible for the investigator to answer whatever questions he or she has posed. The design of an investigation touches almost all aspects of the research, from the minute details of data collection to the selection of the techniques of data analysis.

Like all ‘plans’, of course, it can go wrong, horribly wrong! I say this not to scare you, but simply to make the point that your dissertation is about you and your relationship with the world in all manner of ways. And, as we all know, the world does not always behave in the way we would like it to! So at every stage of the dissertation process there are risks. In part what is important from the beginning is that you acknowledge there are risks, outline what they are and then plan to negate

them as far as you can. The key here is *anticipation* and *preparedness*. That is, thinking ahead and seeing risks before they manifest themselves and having in place a set of clear responses.

In this light, it is possible to identify three main types of risks. The first is *people-related risks*. As Kennedy notes, ‘you must be interested in the project at the outset’ (1999: 128, original emphasis). So, a people risk is that you lack the interest in your dissertation topic, which manifests itself in a lack of application and motivation. This makes the work you do on deciding a topic and honing the research questions particularly important. A dissertation is an independent piece of work. Even at those institutions where the level of support is high, there will still be plenty of times when you will be working by yourself. Another people risk is that you set the bar too high. Being heroic has no place in producing a dissertation; better to be realistic when setting goals and to achieve them. For most students the time allowed to produce a dissertation is not enough to learn a new language, for example, so do not think you can factor this in when deciding on the location of your fieldwork. Ensure that you either have or can acquire relatively easily the skills required to deliver your dissertation. The same goes for the technical skills required to analyse large datasets. Can you write the software program you need? If you don’t have the skills at the beginning of the dissertation process when are you going to acquire them?

*Process-related risks*, such as setting unachievable goals, or assuming that the type of data you require is easily accessible, constitute the second type of risks of which you need to be aware. Students who plan to work with existing data sometimes assume it is easier to get hold of than it is, or assume that it will be in the form in which they need it. Instead, students often have to re-work pre-constructed data, as well as being aware of ‘the why, the how and also the when and where’ (Cloke et al. 2004: 37) of the data construction. If the dataset was assembled for a different purpose or for a different audience what do you need to do to it for it to be useful for your dissertation? And, if you are relying on someone else providing your data there is a risk that they will not deliver the goods. In this case, do you have a plan B? Another process-related risk is the accessing of materials of different sorts, the origins of which are a long way from where you are studying. While not all universities have the same level of resources, generally the literature you seek will be accessible through various on-line catalogues and search engines. Of course, even if you happen to be a student at one of the best-resourced universities in the world, it is unlikely that you will be able to access all the literatures you want on-site! So, at some stage it is likely you are going to have to order (and wait) for certain resources, or spend time working out how to access certain on-line archives or resources. There is always the risk that the documents don’t appear – then what?

The third type of risk is *technology-related risks*. These come in various guises. Whatever your dissertation, there is always the possibility that files can be lost: deleted, corrupted or quite literally lost. So, back up your work – not once, but twice (or even three times: the stakes are that high!) – and don’t keep all the copies in one

place. I once had a student working with me who had three electronic copies of his work, which you might think was good practice but they were *all* in his car when it was stolen a couple of weeks before he was due to submit his dissertation! You may also be using software to generate and analyse data. These programs take time to learn. You need to make sure you know what you are going to do with your data once you have generated it. This demands a degree of technical expertise – and you need to be confident from the beginning that you will get the support as and when you need it. So, for example, if you know you are going to use questionnaires in your dissertation, do you know what sorts of data will be produced and do you know how you will analyse it? If you don't, will there be someone at your institution who can help you over the summer when you want to run your models? You also need to ensure that you understand the statistics/mathematics behind the sorts of numbers produced by software packages, as the assumptions underpinning the data will need to be explained in your dissertation.

Having outlined the various elements to your dissertation and assigned each one the time you believe is needed to complete it, perhaps in the form of a timescale with a series of milestones, and then thought about the risk attached to each, the next step is slowly starting the process. In turning to reading the work of others and producing a series of research questions, exploring the types of methods it might make sense to use given the focus of your dissertation, and then exploring the kinds of data you will produce and how you will analyse them, you will also return to your milestones. It is fine to modify these. The timescale is not set in stone; rather it is a 'live' document, one that reflects where you are in the dissertation process and your informed expectations about what comes next. However, and that said, the end of the timescale is fixed. That is the date for the dissertation to be submitted!

## Starting your dissertation

According to Flick (2011: 32), 'you should begin your research by reading'. This is good advice and something that a number of my students appear to ignore each year! In my experience some students put themselves under enormous pressure when thinking about what should be the focus of their dissertation. Every year I have students come to see me, stuck, unable to decide on what to do for their dissertation. I ask them what they have done so far. A number seem to have sat at a table, in the library or at home, and simply tried to will a dissertation topic/title into being! Many seem to forget the basic skills they have honed in producing pieces of coursework. Instead, sitting on their own, they find it hard to produce – almost out of thin air – a focus for their dissertation. Looking at blank sheets of paper can be disempowering. Evidence suggests that starting the dissertation is something that is found particularly difficult by many UK students (Harrison and Whalley 2008). Moving from not knowing to knowing what you would like to do your dissertation

on is too important to be left to chance, however, and so you need to devise some strategies. Break down the process into clear steps that get you from where you are to where you need to be. Write a list of things that could help you along. And it is not only topic selection that can prove troublesome. While thinking about the focus of your dissertation you also need to be thinking about research questions. This involves narrowing down the focus of your dissertation, moving from an often quite general topic to a more specific set of research questions.

Whether seeking to define the focus of your research or to produce some research questions, a useful way of thinking about both is how actually they emerge most easily out of a series of engagements with something or somebody else. It might be an academic article that you have read that interests you, a professor whom you find particularly inspiring, or something that you have heard on the radio or read in a newspaper (Gatrell and Flowerdew 2005). It can be anything from which you can draw some inspiration and insight, and that will allow you to make some informed choices. After all, as Martin and Flowerdew (2005: 35) note, ‘There are many possible sources of ideas which can be developed into good research questions [or topics].’ In addition to arising out of your relationship with something else, research questions do not come fully formed. They tend to be bitty and disjointed, fragments of questions that you have to put together and take apart, modify and so on over the process of producing your dissertation. Your research questions are not finalized, if that is the right word, until the end. Indeed, the questions will evolve over the course of the dissertation process, which at some institutions can be a whole year. However, and despite acknowledging that they should evolve over time, the first element of producing a dissertation is selecting a focus, broadly understood, and then identifying specific research questions that you intend to address.

If you are reading this book you have already done some work by choosing to research the city. You have chosen a particular focus for your dissertation. However, having decided to undertake an urban project there is still a lot more work to do to decide what it is you want to find out about – that is, the research questions you want to answer. So, there are still some important issues for you to address! Hopefully the rest of this book will help you. However, if you have got to the stage of deciding the focus of your dissertation, it is to be hoped that this has come about in part through the reading advocated by Flick (2011). And, all being well, you will have written notes and reflected on your interactions with something or somebody else. For, as Walliman (2011: 33) explains, the ‘narrowing process will require a lot of background reading in order to discover what has been written about the subject already, what research has been carried out, where further work needs to be done and where controversial issues still remain.’ As if to reinforce the non-linearity of the research process – that is, the moving back and forth between the different elements – having established a focus for your dissertation, and perhaps established some research questions-in-progress (that is, subject to change), for many of you the next step is to (re)turn to various literatures.

## Situating your dissertation

The bottom line is that it is unlikely you will be the first or the last to produce a dissertation in your particular field. However, at times you may feel that what you are doing is truly unique. It probably is in some ways. At other times you may feel like it has all been done before. Again, it probably has in a manner of speaking. These sorts of emotional roller-coasters are not uncommon for students doing a significant piece of work over a number of months or years. Overseeing a research project that means so much to you, literally in terms of its contribution to your overall degree classification, draws on your emotional resources. In my experience students also form a unique bond with their dissertation, sometimes struggling to put some distance between it and them, as they manage other coursework demands. This is something of which to be aware and to manage.

In terms of the ‘value added’ of your dissertation, one minute you are pushing back the boundaries of knowledge, the next minute you are plodding along producing something that no one would ever possibly want to read. The truth though is somewhere in between. Your work will and will not be unique. To appreciate where your dissertation sits *vis-à-vis* other similar studies you are required to ‘situate’ your dissertation; this means to place it in its wider context. There are a number of ‘wider contexts’, the most local, so to speak, being its place alongside other undergraduate or graduate dissertations in your institution. So, it makes sense to have a look through past dissertations to get a feel for the way they look and how they read. Think carefully about when during the process you do this. You want to be informed by the dissertations you read, but you don’t want to be led too much by them. So, be clear on what it is you want out of reading the work of previous students before you begin.

Further afield, according to Flick (2011: 35), four ‘wider contexts’ can be identified. These are:

Theoretical literature about the topic of your study

Methodological literature about how to do your research and how to use the methods you choose

Empirical literature about previous research in the field of your study or similar fields

Theoretical and empirical literature to help contextualize, compare and generalize your findings.

What should strike you immediately is that you need to situate your work in a number of contexts, and that it is not enough just to cite the work of others in your academic context/literature review chapter. The work of others, whether in academic journals, on Internet sites or in newspaper articles, should be cited throughout the text. You are constantly in the throes of comparing your work to others,

whether theoretically, methodologically or empirically. This is the case in all of your dissertation chapters. As Kumar (2011) argues:

The *literature review* is an integral part of the research process and makes a valuable contribution to almost every operational step. It has value even before the first step; that is, when you are merely thinking about a research question that you may want to find answers to through your research journey. In the initial stages of research it helps you establish the theoretical roots of your study, clarify your ideas and develop your research methodology. Late in the process, the literature review serves to enhance and consolidate your own knowledge base and helps you to integrate your findings with the existing body of knowledge. Since an important responsibility in research is to compare your findings with those of others, it is here that the literature review plays an extremely important role. During the write-up ... it helps you to integrate your findings with existing knowledge – that is, to either support or contradict earlier research. (2011: 31–2, original emphasis)

So, different types of literatures will do different sorts of work in your dissertation. In some cases you will use the literature to provide a theoretical background to your dissertation. How have others gone about theorizing the topic you are studying? Is there one theory that has become dominant? Or, are there a range of theories that co-exist, vying for dominance? In other cases the literature you cite and draw upon will allow you to compare your findings with those in other studies. So, you are studying the planning process in Oran. What do previous studies of the city in general and its planning in particular say? What about other studies within Algeria, or within the wider North African region?

A further body of literature will allow you to write in an informed manner about your choice of research methods. What sorts of methods have been used by studies answering similar research questions used? What sorts of knowledge do you want to generate? As you will see reading through the rest of this book, there are a number of methods used to study cities. Your choice of methods is one that needs to be made in relation to your philosophical and theoretical approaches, as all the authors in this collection explain. Each method has its advantages and disadvantages. It is particularly important that you learn from the work of others who have done research on your topic. So, if you decide you want to study housing markets in Latin American cities and the majority of work in this field uses pre-constructed secondary data on cost and tenure then you need to think about whether you want to do likewise, or to approach the topic slightly differently. That might mean asking a different set of questions of housing markets in Latin American cities, which would necessitate thinking about the research methods that might allow you to answer these questions. For example, and to quote Cloke et al. (2004: 37), ‘We may want to know things about the characteristics, activities, worldviews, and the like of people living in a given locality.’ If this is the case for you, then throughout this volume perhaps interviews (Cochrane, Chapter 4), ethnography (Swanson, Chapter 5), diaries (Latham, Chapter 8) or videos (Garrett, Chapter 10) might be most appropriate.

Perhaps the literature that students find hardest to use in their dissertations is that on different ways of knowing. '[P]hilosophies inform work and ... research questions are always based on assumptions and choices between different ways of knowing', according to Aitken and Valentine (2006: 13). So, an important aspect of the formative work you do for your dissertation is to find out about the philosophical approaches adopted by others working on the same sorts of topics that you believe will form the cornerstone of your dissertation. This aspect of the dissertation is non-negotiable. As Kitchin and Tate (2000: 4) correctly state, 'no research ... takes place in a philosophical vacuum'. Cities continue to be researched from a range of different philosophical perspectives. At any one time a particular approach may be dominant. Certainly much of the late 1970s/early 1980s urban studies literature was heavily informed by Marxism, and in particular the writings of Manuel Castells (1977) and David Harvey (1973), amongst others. This matters in terms of the research questions that were asked, the subjects or topics that were valued and studied, the methods that were used, and how the findings were written up. The current studying of cities is not dominated by any one approach. If you read urban studies textbooks, whether written out of anthropology, human geography, planning or sociology, that much should be clear (Davies and Imbroscio 2008, 2011; Gottdiener and Hutchison 2010; Low 1999; Pacione 2009). So, as you read the work of academics on the topic or topics you currently believe will constitute the focus of your dissertation, stop and think about their philosophical approach. Your choice is one that has to be made in relation to the kinds of theories and methods you intend to use in your dissertation, as if to reinforce how the different elements of the research process are all interconnected. It is not a choice that can be made in splendid isolation. Many of you will probably adopt a post-colonial or a post-structural approach. Be clear what this might mean for the topic you study, how you study it, and what you do with the data you generate. Others may adopt a positivist approach, and all that goes with it. There is no absolute 'right' or 'wrong' philosophical approach when you are thinking about studying cities. Rather, the goal should be for you to become familiar with the academic literature that exists on what you expect to be your dissertation topic and to understand the links between the theoretical, philosophical and methodological approaches adopted in this work.

Returning to Flick's (2011) different types of 'wider contexts', underpinning each of them is a set of assumptions that you know what you are looking for, which may or may not be the case. Hart (1998: 13) defines a literature review's content as:

The selection of available documents (both published and unpublished) on the topic, which contain information, ideas, data, and evidence written from a particular standpoint to fulfil certain aims or express certain views on the nature of the topic and how it is to be investigated, and the effective evaluation of these documents in relation to the research being proposed.

Locating theoretical, methodological and empirical literature for your dissertation is an art not a science, however. While there are some systematic ways of going about

searching, such as those outlined by Martin and Flowerdew (2005), ultimately you need to factor in some time spent that generates little by way of return. Or that is how it might seem. However, it is the act of searching and what you learn through the process, rather than what you do or do not find, that might ultimately benefit you most in your study. You are likely to hone your topic, focus your research questions, and generally rework your emphasis in and through searching for literature, in the process fixing more closely on what is and what is not 'relevant'. Taking notes on what you have found, reading theoretical pieces alongside one another, discussing the virtues of different methods, exploring possible case studies for your dissertation – this is the iterative work that you will do as you situate your dissertation. So, rather than a set of 'relevant' literatures – theoretical, methodological and empirical – waiting to be discovered by you, they are in fact constituted and reconstituted by the work you do. Until you have finished and submitted your dissertation it is not so easy to draw firm lines around 'relevant' and 'not relevant' literatures. Only through this situational work will you become clearer on the focus of your dissertation, your research questions and how you will go about addressing them.

## Conclusion

This chapter has taken you quickly through the different elements of producing a dissertation up to the point where you begin to undertake research. It has emphasized the need to plan the dissertation as a project, with a clear timescale and milestones. There are risks involved in producing a dissertation, of which you need to be aware. An important element to producing a dissertation is your engagement with, and use of, existing literatures. There will be philosophical, theoretical, methodological and empirical literatures that you will need to discover, read, learn from and think about how you use in your own work: 'No writing is done in a vacuum' (Walliman 2011: 315). The different literatures will become more or less 'relevant' as you hone and refine your topic and research questions, something you do best through reading the work of others, whether it is a piece in a newspaper, an item on television or an article in an academic journal. All of us are 'largely dependent upon data for the successful completion of our research projects' (Cloke et al. 2004: 35), and the following eight chapters will each discuss a particular method, the type of data it generates and its use as part of an urban project.

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