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Engaging (with) Places **Employing audio-visual recording glasses to study** **emplaced attachments to everyday features of the** **historic urban landscape**

Abstract

Places are significant for people, providing grounds for a sense of belonging, identity, and well-being. This article draws on a research project examining people-place relations within the everyday material environment of central Reykjavík. Grounded in a critical heritage studies perspective, the project aims to contribute to an understanding of how individuals ascribe meaning and value to the historic urban landscape and analyse the emotions and affective qualities that emerge through sensory engagement with places perceived as material embodiments of the past. The article addresses the method of solitary, self-led participant walks using audio-visual recording glasses, supplemented with follow-up interviews. This approach facilitates in-situ, on-the-move observations of participants' spatial encounters, offering insights into their emotional and sensory experiences of the urban landscape. The article delineates how the method enabled participants to immerse themselves in the flow of their walks, evoking a variety of sensorial expressions, mnemonic fragments, and shared narratives prompted by encounters with the material facets of the city centre. The findings highlight the potential of the method to provide partial yet meaningful access to the affective and emotional dimensions of people's interactions with urban spaces, offering insights into the ways individuals experience and value the historic urban landscape.

Keywords: Sensory ethnography, Emplacement, Place attachment, Place memory, Historic urban landscape

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ETHNOLOGIA FENNICA Vol. 51 (2024, issue 2), 7–34. <https://doi.org/10.23991/ef.v51i2.142184>

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Introduction: The case of the absent fencepost

Torfi is a man in his fifties. He is participating in an ethnographic project studying people-place relations focused on everyday aspects of the historic urban landscape in central Reykjavík. He has been provided with audio-visual recording glasses and sent off, on his own, for a stroll in the city. He has received minimal instructions but has been advised to communicate verbally his perception of the environment for the benefit of the recording. A few minutes into his walk he is strolling along a street, mostly lined with residential housing. His attention is caught by a building a few houses down. As he approaches the building he informs us, the researchers: “Here ahead is the old ... I think it’s the Seaman’s College ... anyway that yellowish building in front”. He is slightly hesitant in identifying the house but approaching the place calls forth a clear association: “Due to this one occasion”, he says, “I have quite a vivid memory connected to this building”. He then goes on to tell us about his first girlfriend, that she had been studying abroad and how he had sometimes visited her there. And then his thoughts go back to when they were both in Reykjavík on a “romantic walk” in the neighbourhood. At this point in Torfi’s narration, he passes the front of the house and turns his gaze to the pavement beside the house, at what currently appears to function as a car park: “It was here to the left, just here on the pavement”, Torfi directs his gaze to a specific spot on the pavement, indicating a precise location. He then shifts his eyes slightly: “Maybe just here, or here where I’m standing, I’m not quite sure. It’s not here anymore, there was this old fencepost, just here.” Torfi explains:

And we were just walking and discussing that we would be separated for some time. Then she just said: Come along here and when you see this post, should you have forgotten me, you’ll be reminded. You’ll remember me when you see this fencepost. That’s that! Later we split up, of course. But for years, for as long as the post was there, whenever I went past, I was reminded of her. This was a pretty good trick she played on me. She knew what she was doing. (H-113)

In a self-conscious act of associating herself with a fencepost, the girlfriend recognised the potential power of cementing place and meaning. For Torfi, decades later, even though the fencepost is long since gone, the place still fosters this memory of a past romantic relationship. He however suggested that the association was not as vivid after the post had been removed, “the post disappeared, the memory faded”, indicating the significance of the tangible in facilitating acts of remembrance. Even though the material artefact that prompted the reminiscing is absent, Torfi can still situate the missing fencepost quite precisely, with the help of the material context, notably the “yellowish building” and the pavement by its side. In the curious situation of

being a participant in a study on people-place relations, expected to express his sentiments verbally as he moves through the urban landscape, this is the association that springs to mind as he approaches this place.

A week after the walk, Torfi came in for a follow-up interview, designed to delve deeper into the content captured by the recording. We had chosen a few segments from the recording to review and discuss, including the one described above. In the interview, Torfi thought it curious how his memories were tied to the fencepost, which he said had been “an oddly unattractive, old, and square thing”. Living in the vicinity he said that he had “always noted it” when he passed by, “checking if it was still there”. The fencepost seemed to have opened for further recollections about the couple’s time together as the follow-up revealed more details about their relationship, which according to Torfi had all become “kind of capsulated in this fencepost” (H-113f). The reminiscing that the post prompted was therefore not just tied to the specific place but fostered thoughts on a specific period in Torfi’s life. Even after the post had been removed, its absent presence (Hetherington 2004; Harrison 2013), supported by other elements in the surroundings, seemed to add a layer to the sensory significance of the place for Torfi: “And now, always when I go past there, I remember, this just adds on to this [experience] ... aah it [the post] is gone”. Somewhat inconsistently with what he said during his walk he concludes that “it’s still all there”, referring to the memories and sentiments prompted by the fencepost (H-113f).



Image 1. On the sidewalk to the left of this building, which previously hosted the Navigational College, was the fencepost that awakened memories for Torfi. Photo: Jóhannes Birgir Guðvarðarson, 2024.

Absent or not, the fencepost is vital for Torfi's embodied and emplaced narration of the past and feeds into his relationship with the place and the significance that it holds for him. His mnemonic and sensory entanglement with the spectral presence of the post is an example of a way people form emotional attachments to places, even to such "oddly unattractive" and seemingly insignificant everyday features of the environment. In addition to representing an aspect of his past and being an aide-memoire, the fencepost facilitates an emotional bond between Torfi and the urban setting. A bond that joins the present-day Torfi, his long past experience, and the materiality of the fencepost, linking the present and the past. Such subjective relations, on a personal and communal level, are important as they dictate the (durable yet provisional) meaning and value of the environment. In the literature on place attachment, it is recognised that such people-place relations are beneficial and may indeed be a bedrock for feelings of belonging, sense of identity and well-being (cf. Scannell & Gifford 2017; Ilovan & Markuszewska 2022).

The case of the absent fencepost, delineated above, derives from a research project conducted in central Reykjavík, seeking to contribute to an understanding of how people ascribe meaning and value to the everyday urban landscape that people perceive to be of the past. It seeks to analyse the types of emotions expressed and understood through shared meanings as well as the more somatic, preconscious and relational affective qualities (Wetherell 2012) that emerge through sensory engagement with places that they associate with a communal or personal past. The research project employs three mutually supportive ethnographic methods, designed to facilitate the observation of participants' spatial encounters and practices. These methods are specifically devised for in-situ and on-the-move engagements between participants and the material environment of the city centre. This article aims to explore the possibilities and limitations of one of the methods used: the self-led participant walks with audio-visual recording glasses and follow-up interviews. The objective is to examine how the use of this method can provide partial yet significant insight into the emotional and affective encounters with urban spaces that are both historically and experientially layered. To clarify the specificities of the method, references will be made to the other approaches employed in the project: walk-alongs and focus-group sessions.

The article is structured as follows: first, we will outline the theoretical framework that forms the basis of our methodological approach. Second, we will explain our research design in more detail and how we see the different methods as mutually supportive. Third, we will explore how the participants engaged with the research design. Finally, we will give insight into the diversity of participants' perceptions as they engaged with places in the

city and the narratives they offered on their self-led walks, as documented by the audio-visual recording glasses as well as reflections offered in the follow-up interviews.

Theoretical framework

Addressing how the concept of heritage has undergone a process of rearrangement in recent years, Schofield (2016, 1) identifies an understanding of heritage that has been gaining momentum as “something everyone can (and to an extent does already) engage with”. Rejecting the priority of the “authoritative, elected or appointed heritage experts”, he highlights a move towards a more democratic approach to heritage that is appreciative of the diversity of people’s dynamic engagement with the past. Leaving aside the question of if this has indeed changed how heritage is managed (Colomer 2023; Jónsdóttir 2023), the multiplicity of articulations of heritage has clearly shifted the boundaries of the concept, taking us, as Schofield (2016, 1) notes, “beyond its comfort zone, from the special and the exceptional places and things, to the everyday”.

Such ideals of democratisation resonate with a range of institutional initiatives such as the Faro Convention (Council of Europe 2005) and, in terms of the urban heritage, UNESCO’s (2011) recommendations on the historic urban landscape. In terms of place, the adoption (from the Burra charter) of the notion of *cultural significance* is suggestive. The term refers to values “embodied in the place itself, its fabric, setting, use, associations, meanings, records, related places, and related objects”. While it is not accurately specified whose values are being referred to, the diversity of connotations of places for different people is recognised: “Places may have a range of values for different individuals or groups”. To accommodate for this possible diversity, it becomes critical to break from value judgements prescribed by the authorised heritage discourse (Smith 2006). Here the term *plural heritages*, as developed by Whitehead, Schofield and Bozoğlu (2021), becomes useful when wanting to understand the tangible heritage of the city, based on the multitude of stories told and sensory encounters people engage with in their everyday lives. “To think with plural heritages”, they suggest “involves recognizing the different meanings of the emplaced past for different groups and different people” (2021, 3). By acknowledging the multiplicity of people’s relationship with places it becomes possible to understand the different aspects that inform people’s place attachment and sense of belonging.

In our project, we have sought to bracket value judgments and expert premises inherent in formal heritage classificatory schemes. The project seeks an approach to heritage from below (Muzaini & Minca 2018), emphasising the need to recognise how people relate to places that they themselves perceive to be a part of “their” past. Here we seek to include whatever aspect of the

historic urban landscape that has meaning for the participants as they engage with places that are in some way significant to them, without specifically directing their attention to sites that have been sanctioned as heritage. This does not infer that expert judgements and recognised sites are irrelevant as indeed they have been integrated into popular discourse and perception. But as Pérez and Colomer (2024) indicate, even in heritage management projects designed as participatory, there is always the danger that such advances end up endorsing the expert premises, “conferring a symbolic character to these bottom-up practices” (2024, 227). In attempting to access what matters to people – and not only what they have been taught matters (by experts) – in terms of places and the historic urban landscape in general, there is a need to keep the authoritative discourse at bay.

Exploring people’s engagement with the historic urban landscape calls for scrutiny of the people-place nexus. In addressing this relationship, the notion of *place attachment* has recently received attention from heritage scholars (Madgin & Lesh 2021; Čebroň Lipovec 2023). The concept, developed by geographers and environmental psychologists, refers to the emotional relations or bonds that individuals develop with specific places and can encompass feelings of affection, belonging, and identity. Importantly, place attachment encompasses both cognitive and affective dimensions, as individuals form mental representations of places and cultivate affective and emotional ties to them (Altman & Low 1992; Lewicka 2011; 2014; Smith 2018; Manzo & Devine-Wright 2021). In attempting to understand how our participants engage with places that they perceive to be of the past, we have found this concept highly useful in distinguishing the different aspects of how and why these places matter to people.

Directing the focus on the emotional ties that emerge in people-place relations also calls for an examination of the more-than-representational aspect of people’s engagement in and with places. The use of sensory approaches to engage with how people encounter heritage has received widespread attention in the last decade. The affective turn has had extensive influence within critical heritage studies as scholars have turned their attention to emotional and affective aspects of the cultural process that constitutes heritage in addition to the discursive and representational facets (Harrison 2013; Waterton & Watson 2015; Crouch 2015; Tolia-Kelly, Waterton & Watson 2017; Smith, Wetherell & Campbell 2018).

Simultaneously, we have seen a surge in experimentations with sensory ethnography (Pink 2015; Vannini 2024) designed to capture some of the multi-sensory contexts that define our existence and understanding of others and the environment. Sensory methodology is sensitive to the understanding

that people's engagement with the environment is not just a question of registering the objective stimuli that it offers, but rather that the meaning and value of places is an interactive process, where the experiences, knowledge, and memory of the sensing individual enter a dynamic relationship with the material qualities of the sensed environment. Pink (2015, 28) refers to emplaced sensory ethnography that "attends to the question of experience by accounting for the relationships between bodies, minds, and the materiality and sensoriality of the environment." This infers that perception is central to how people relate to places.

In emphasising perception, sensory ethnography draws on insights from the phenomenological tradition, stressing the embodied and emplaced nature of people's experience and being in the world (Pink 2015). Building on Merleau-Ponty's argumentation on the central role of bodily presence and action in human existence, it is often highlighted that emplacement constitutes the existential predicament of our existence – as Trigg (2012, 4) notes: "We are forever in the here, and it is from that here that our experiences take place". Our embodied subjectivity is thus always emplaced, and it is from that point that our multisensory understanding of the environment emerges. From this perspective it becomes important to devise methodologies that can access some of the more-than-representational aspects of our engagements with the environment and, from a heritage studies perspective, why "old" places matter to people.

Methodological Framework

There is a growing repository of ethnographic methods aimed at grasping elements of the affective and sensory aspects of people's engagement with the environment. As Degen and Rose (2012) argue, such methods are needed because it is not possible to account for these engagements entirely as an effect of the urban design (cf. Manzo & Pinto de Carvalho 2021). Advancements in technology, easy access to an array of gadgets that can be employed to monitor movement, various physiological variables, as well as audio and video have added to the toolbox of researchers interested in analysing the dynamics of personal interaction (Pink 2015; Madgin & Lesh 2021; Osborne 2022; Järviluoma & Murray, 2023; Pernarella & Madsen, 2023). Despite the growing interest in the role of the senses and affect within social sciences, there is still much work to be done, as highlighted by Madgin and Lesh (2021, 7), in developing research methods to enhance access to the sensory aspects of people-place relations. Pink (2015, 150) advocates for mixed-method approaches and encourages ethnographers to re-think available methods in ways that are attentive to the senses.

In our project we have opted for a range of qualitative methods, drawing on established ethnographic approaches as well as experimenting with the less rehearsed use of the audio-visual recording glasses. We concur with Pink (2015, 160) on the need to adopt different methods to tackle the question of how the multisensory environments that people engage with are experienced and understood on different levels and from different angles. Juxtaposing different methods might in itself offer an enhanced chance to access people's emotional attachment to places and the tacit and emplaced knowledge that a sensory ethnography seeks to document.

The project thus adopts the three different research methods to examine people's relationship with everyday cultural heritage, in an attempt to offer a broader and more varied take on people-place relations than a single-method approach would do. Each method is designed to complement the others, facilitating openings that the others might foreclose. Together they are oriented at fulfilling the project's goals of giving insights into the affective, sensory, and emotional attachments of the participants to places they consider of significance as places transposing the past into the present.

The first method involves the participant going for a walk with a researcher, who engages them in conversation, thereby actively seeking information about the participant's cognitive and sensory perceptions of the physical environment they pass through. This builds on the well-established method of walk-alongs that has been widely used in different variations for research, e.g. on the sensory experience of urban environments (Kusenbach 2003; Degen & Rose 2012; Hill 2013; Holgerson 2017; Rishbeth 2021;). This method permits a dialogue between researcher and participant as they move through the environment, allowing for a reflective exploration of the participants embodied engagement with place. However, the result is highly influenced by the emplaced presence and interest of the researcher.

The second method involves focus group sessions (Krueger & Casey 2015) where three to four individuals who are acquainted with each other meet at a predetermined location in the city. The session is moderated by a researcher and is video recorded from a distance to cause minimal disturbance. The sessions include a photo-elicitation component as the group is presented with old photographs from the place as an incentive for remembering and discussing the changing urban landscape. The method recognises the collaborative aspect of people-place relations, and that perception and knowledge of place may be negotiated via social engagement with place. This also leads to power dimensions within the group possibly influencing the trajectory of the sessions and any co-production of meaning and understanding.

Finally, we employ the use of the audio-visual recording glasses, the ones Torfi was wearing during his mnemonic encounter with the absent present fencepost. The methodology is modelled on the sensory research method (SRM) developed by Steven Cooke, Kristal Buckley, and associates, undertaken in Melbourne and Ballarat in Victoria, Australia (Cooke & Constantinidis 2019; Cooke & Buckley 2020; Cooke & Buckley 2021). It is designed as “a way of recording and sharing the micro-interactions with our everyday ordinary heritage landscapes”, based on “an urgent and growing desire to experience and share new approaches, and to decentre the “expert” heritage practitioner in the act of identifying how and why places and areas are important”. Referring to their findings, they concluded that the method evoked “at least in part – the experienced multi-sensory mobile engagement with place that may be missing from talk-only interviews”. Adapting this methodology to our project we followed their proposal as it regards the progression of data collection implementing a repeated process of discrete stages (Cooke & Buckley 2021, 150–152). Thus, on the one hand, the data collecting phase includes documentation of the participants’ solitary encounters with the urban landscape, capturing what people are looking at as well as speech and environmental sounds, with minimal influence from the researcher. On the other hand, it involves a detailed conversation within a week after the solitary walk, which provides a chance to reflect on the experience in collaboration with the researcher. Rather than adhering to a structured interview format, the follow-up interviews employ a narrative methodology (Schorch 2015; Schorch, Walton, Priest & Paradies 2015), guiding the conversation through the recording to foster a more natural discussion. This approach allows the participants to articulate their experience and offer additional insights into the observations made during the self-guided walk.

The data was analysed by way of a grounded research approach (Charmaz 2014; Creswell & Poth 2018). This approach is particularly suitable for analysing miscellaneous data, as it offers the creation of focus and flexibility that are beneficial for comparing the varied data from different individuals. Moreover, this approach aligns well with the research goal of exploring data through the lens of individuals’ experiences rather than predefined themes (Charmaz 2014, 3-15). This is especially relevant when investigating the connections people have with an array of places and how these relationships are reflected in the data. As the study involves a substantial number of transcriptions the data coding has been conducted using Atlas.ti software.

Participants for the study were recruited using the snowball sampling method, complemented by advertisements on social media platforms. The sole

criterion was that participants felt in some way connected to the city centre and had a long-term or repeated relationship with this place, emphasising the personal connections established within its historic context. The demographic composition of our participants shows a gender balance and covers a wide age range from 25 to 80 years of age, with the majority being between forty and seventy. The predominance of participants in this age range is attributed to their longer history within the city centre and a greater awareness of their connection in comparison to younger individuals. However, this does not imply that younger participants have not formed significant connections with the area. Challenges specific to older participants included limited mobility and feelings of insecurity because of it. The ethnographic material discussed in the following is derived from 20 self-led walks, which typically lasted about an hour, and the follow-up interviews, lasting for a similar duration.

Engaging with the Research Design

The objective of the self-led walks is to simulate some aspects of everyday solitary walks in the city. The method seeks to document participant engagement with places and at the same time limit the direct influence or guidance of the researcher. However, as Kusenbach (2003, 464) highlights in terms of walk-alongs, such walks are “obviously not a naturally occurring social occasion”. Being recruited to an ethnographic study and having received limited instructions about what to do places participants in an unusual situation, which they are certainly aware of as they set off on their walks.

For the walks, the participants were provided with iVUE Vista spectacles with either clear or shaded lenses. While the glasses may seem somewhat conspicuous, they can pass as regular, stylish glasses or sunglasses. They are simple enough to use and participants did not encounter significant problems operating them. Some participants were concerned, especially at the start of their journey, if the video recording was running. For instance, one participant took off his glasses along the route to check if the red indicator light, signalling that a recording was underway, was flashing (H-118). For participants who wear glasses regularly, mounting the audio-visual recording glasses posed a problem. Most went without their own glasses which meant that their sight was diminished to some extent, while one participant opted to place the audio-visual recording glasses on top of her own, making her quite conscious about her appearance (H-110). However, as a rule, wearing the glasses did not seem to trouble the participants. As for the quality of the recordings, there were no substantial problems. Minor issues arose, mainly related to disturbances in the audio recording caused by wind or traffic, but these issues did not significantly impact the recordings.

The limited instructions the participants received consisted of asking them to think beforehand of two or three places in the central area of the city that held personal significance for them, that they would then visit en route. Furthermore, they were encouraged to express themselves verbally during the walk, communicating reminiscences, sentiments, and contemplations that emerged as they moved through the urban landscape. To reduce the awkwardness of wandering around town wearing conspicuous glasses and “talking to themselves” they were advised to envision themselves talking on a hands-free mobile device. This worked for some, while others professed indifference to the opinion of others, one participant in her fifties stating that she was too old to worry about others’ opinions of her (H-102). Originally adopting such indifference, Pétur started his walk in a quiet part of the area but as he approached more crowded areas, he became acutely aware of his situation and remarked: “Well, now I’m entering the crowd. That makes me even more of an oddity” (H-116). However, this did not seem to inhibit his speaking. Though some remarked on how “strange it [felt] to walk around the city centre talking to oneself” (H-105), most seemed quite at ease pretending to be on the phone and almost all participants proved not at all reluctant to express themselves verbally as they moved through the city landscape, sharing their knowledge, thoughts, memories, reactions, et cetera, as they engaged with places and routes. Some even indicated that the glasses, worn for the benefit of an academic research project, proved to be “a cap of invisibility”, setting them slightly apart from their everyday and thus allowing them to express themselves freely without being too conscious about the opinions of other pedestrians. “It’s fun to walk around the town like you’re in a capsule”, Torfi remarked at one stage, “it is very comfortable” (H-113). When asked in the follow-up interview, he said that he was aware of the glasses for the first two to three minutes but quickly forgot about them and felt relaxed inside “the capsule” that the glasses created (H-113f).

The participants who signed up for the study approached the project of walking in the city somewhat on their own terms, especially given the limited instructions received. Some were drawn to the study by an interest in old buildings and set out with the intention of exploring them. Others embarked on what they considered a memory walk, while some, who traverse the area regularly, saw participating in the study as an opportunity to add purpose to their routine. Despite starting with specific intentions, participants encountered various unexpected elements along the way that captured their attention and shifted their focus to entirely different aspects than they had anticipated. This ranged from crossing the street to admire flowers to being moved by unexpected aspects of the built environment that stirred memories or emotions. This demonstrates that interacting with the environment is an embod-

ied activity involving multiple senses (Ingold & Vergunst 2008) and how such sensory engagements can override pre-existing plans as the senses guide the participants' actions.

Indeed, walking through the city to explore cognitive and sensory experiences involves engaging with persistently changing stimuli, as O'Neill and Roberts (2020) point out. Seasonal changes and the ever-shifting weather in Reykjavík may constitute a significant factor in how participants experience the urban landscape. The time of day when the walk is undertaken likewise influences the ambience of places. The sounds and aroma met in the city may alter from one walk to the next, as might parts of the tangible environment – cars come and go, buildings are torn down, new ones appear, others are renovated, and new street signs are put up. As participants navigate through the city, they also meet different people.

Several instances were documented when participants ran into acquaintances during their walks. Kusenbach (2003, 464) describes research walks as “contrived social situations” that disrupt the natural flow of events. This was evident in our research, as participants, aware of the recording in progress, reacted in diverse ways to such encounters. One participant, not expecting to meet anyone familiar, abruptly greeted an acquaintance before hurrying on, later expressing remorse for not greeting them properly and taking the time for a brief chat (H-116). Another chose to mute her recording during a conversation with friends. Unmuting the recording she apologetically stated that “you have to greet your friends” (H-112). Yet another encountered a friend and explained that she was recording with the glasses for research purposes. The friend responded by posing in front of the camera and greeting “the viewers” cheerfully (H-103). These varied responses highlight how walking for research purposes influences participants' reactions to a normal social situation.

The level of preparation for the walking route varied among participants. Some only planned the initial part of the route, making decisions about where to go next in the moment. This sometimes led to participants wandering outside the designated area of the study, into neighbouring suburbs. Others, like Eva (H-112), prepared the entire route within the city centre, concluding with a momentous finale – a house she referred to as the “Palace of memories”. For her, this place holds many cherished memories from her childhood to the present. While some participants had, like Eva, planned a specific point to end their walk, others stopped the recording as they approached their home or car, and still others spontaneously chose a significant spot to end the walk. This is what Torfi did, standing on a small rise overlooking the city centre and the harbour, with a view towards Mount Esja across the fjord: “Good to end this up here ... so pleasant to enjoy this view” (H-113) and then turning off the recording.

Perceiving and narrating the city

Equipped with the audio-visual recording glasses, most participants seemed to enter an introspective state of mind as they set off on their walk through the city. Shielded by “the cap of invisibility” they were focused on absorbing the environment and communicating their perceptions and stories. Though some showed signs of being quite self-aware, others seemed, at times at least, to be completely absorbed in a world of their own, walking light-heartedly and humming to themselves in between sharing their memories, thoughts, narratives, and sentiments. At other times, and more with some than others, a more learned approach took over, with participants sharing formal knowledge of urban history, aesthetics, and city planning. Either or, the walks unleashed stories and observations revealing connections between the participants and the historic urban landscape they encountered. Curious similarities can be detected between the act of walking and narrating a story – in the way we retrace our steps so others can follow (Ingold 2007 in O’Neill & Roberts 2020, 5). The recordings from the glasses and follow-up interviews allow us to follow in the footsteps of the participants. The objective is to sample how participants, left to themselves, albeit with a video recorder placed between their eyes, tell stories prompted by their encounters and how they communicate their perceptions of the urban landscape, ultimately revealing the meaning and value it holds for them.

Walking in the city

For many of the participants, walking through the city centre is a part of their everyday practice. Grímur is one of those who regularly take a walk around the area, he enjoys the chance to reminisce about his childhood, “telling stories of how it used to be, though not everyone is always keen to listen” (H-115). He is referring to members of his family who join him on these walks from time to time. With the recording glasses, he seized the chance to have an audience that might be more receptive to his narratives and to share his knowledge and memories of the area’s bygone times, effectively mapping out images in his mind. In this active process of reminiscence, it can be said that he was both reconfiguring his relationship with the past and reactivating it. Thus, we can say that he enacted his “relationship to the past from a specific point in the present” (Erll & Rigney 2009, 2) by retrieving past stories and expressing them.

The walks brought forth different narratives shaped by the varying perceptions that different areas prompted, from residential neighbourhoods to shopping zones, nightclubs, and areas of urban nature (cf. Degen & Rose 2012). This is evident in the narrative of Inga, whose focus shifted as she moved through

the city centre. At the beginning of the walk, she enthusiastically shared her knowledge of the residential area where she has resided all her life. But as Inga ventured beyond her immediate neighbourhood, that narrative became less prominent and the engagement with the landscape kindled different sentiments. Passing the Cathedral inspired a kind of reverence and when she reached Tjörnin (the lake in the city centre) she expressed an experience of tranquillity, describing the site as “beautiful, so peaceful and quiet” (H-106). Surrounded by old buildings and trees, and hosting a rich birdlife, Tjörnin, along with the Cathedral, elicited quite a distinct response from Inga in comparison to the adjacent neighbourhood where she lives. Her narrative shifted from sharing her extensive knowledge of the area to savouring the walk itself and communicating her sensory experience.

As Pink (2015) observes, given that walking is a multi-sensory event where all senses come into play, the sensory stimuli provoked by the urban environment are bound to influence participants’ experiences and recollections of places. Bendix (2011) highlights how perception through the senses, particularly scents, can evoke deep memories and feelings tied to specific places. For example, the scent from a diner instantly triggered Torfi’s memories from his childhood involving walks with his late father, which often ended with them getting hamburgers. In this case, it was not the place itself that activated the memory since it did not exist at that time, but primarily the scent, which he associated with pleasant memories, “despite having stopped eating meat a long time ago” (H-113). This exemplifies Bendix’s (2011) observation that scents can serve as powerful catalysts for memory, evoking complex emotional landscapes. Despite the absence of the exact place from his childhood, the scent alone was enough to transport Torfi back to cherished moments with his father, underscoring the sensory dimensions of memory and place.

As the participants perceived the environment through all their senses, the soundscape of the city can also be seen as integral to their experience of walking through the urban landscape (cf. Bull & Back 2003; Bull 2024). For instance, the church bells of the city centre elicited attention and reactions from the participants. The sound reminded one of a grandfather clock that was in her grandmother’s home, which was located near the church. In her childhood years, she “enjoyed listening to the sound of the clocks striking simultaneously with the same rhythm, a so-called Big Ben chimes” (H-109). Another woman, who lives in the vicinity of the church, says she enjoys listening to the clocks and “sometimes opens the window to hear better” (H-106). Yet another found the sound aggressive when she first moved near the church, but after living there for a while, she began to appreciate the bell chimes (H-108). The sound of the church bells brought forth memories and

evoked pleasant feelings for these women. City sounds vary, some of them elicited pleasant feelings, like the bell chime, while traffic noise acted as a disturbance to the participants, who tended to shun places with noisy traffic. It can partly be explained by their awareness of the ongoing audio recording and the realisation that such a sound could disrupt it. Additionally, they might have preferred strolling around in quieter places.

The years of youth

Engagement with the different vicinities that the participants encountered on their walks often sparked memories of specific periods in their lives. Torfi's meeting with the absent fencepost is a clear example, taking him back to his early twenties (H-113). As noted above, Inga grew up in a residential neighbourhood adjacent to the city centre, where she still resides in the family house passed down through several generations. Actively engaged in the family history, this positions her as somewhat of an authority on the area, possessing profound knowledge spanning decades of buildings and inhabitants. Living in this neighbourhood, she holds memories from all periods of her life and feels a strong connection to the place that is underscored by her knowledge. Though length of residence is not the only indicator of a strong place attachment it is traditionally seen as an important factor in facilitating people-place relations (Lewicka 2014, 51). While walking in this neighbourhood, Inga (H-106) shared her knowledge but also reminisced about her youth, revealing cherished memories, youthful exuberance, and games played with friends. As Erll & Rigney (2009, also Hussein et. al. 2020) highlight in terms of cultural memory, personal memory is a dynamic process. As Inga (and the other participants) walked through the centre of their hometown, the environment triggered their memory. This underscores the active and situational nature of remembering; the act of recalling is a process influenced and shaped by the interaction of people and place.

Certain streets that Torfi walked also motivated sentiments about his youth, centring around warm memories of his father. He experienced a blend of grief from his loss as an adult and cherished recollections of childhood strolls through these streets, extended with tales from his father's youth, who was also brought up in the area. "It is the overarching memory of these walks [with my father] that resonates so deeply, more than any specific event. These memories are incredibly heartwarming," reflected Torfi (H-113). Similarly to Torfi and Inga, numerous participants found themselves reminiscing about their childhood at certain stages of their walks, sharing intimate moments as they spontaneously emerged in dialogue with their environment.

Other locations triggered memories of different life stages. As Torfi approached an area with more shops, bars, cafés, and restaurants, the environment brought forth memories from his adolescence and early adulthood (H-113). This part of the city, with its rich cultural and entertainment offerings, has long been a magnet for young people in search of leisure. There you would find places that appealed to young people, where they could “hang out with their friends” (H-107). Participants like Torfi fondly remembered this period of their lives, immersed in the lively social scene. However, not all were eager to share reflections on this period of their life. Stína, for example, passed two once-familiar nightclubs with a shake of her head, signifying a desire to leave those memories behind: “Here at 22 [bar] we partied a lot, oh yes, bah, and Sirkus, yea!” and then turns to other issues (H-103). Her reaction closed the door on further tales from that era, illustrating the varied ways individuals relate to their past and what they choose to share. Traumatic or not, not all associations made during the walks are expressed verbally by the participant and accessible to the researchers. At some level, they are always selected before being shared (Hussein et. al. 2020).

Participants brought to life memories of various leisure and entertainment spots they had frequented during specific periods of their lives as they passed by these locations. Some of the establishments remain operational, while others have ceased to exist, leaving behind only the buildings or the locations themselves to trigger memories. Lárus, for instance, decided to have a look behind a fenced-off site that had been the site of a beloved café that Lárus frequented in his younger days but has since been demolished. Behind the high plywood fence, now prominently decorated with graffiti, the ruins of the building remain. A glimpse over the fence instantly prompted reminiscences of friends and features of the old café (H-107). In the follow-up interview, he elaborated on the incident, expressing his surprise at the sight of “nothing but grass and moss-covered ruins” (H-107f). As for Torfi and the missing fencepost, although the house is gone, the ruins remain and serve as a reminder of the past, evoking memories for Lárus of the period in his life when he attended the café to hang out with his friends. In his memory, Lárus finds a connection between the materiality of the ruins and his experience that becomes significant for him.

Old houses – in place, absent and substitutes

Changes in the urban landscape are inevitable, eliciting reactions and memories from locals about lost elements, ranging from grand buildings that have disappeared, to missing fenceposts. Being in a mode of regeneration, the city centre of Reykjavík has seen the disappearance of several old build-

ings, a transformation that often evokes a sense of loss among participants. Among these is Fjalakötturinn, a building that was situated on Reykjavík's oldest street, demolished in 1985 after a fierce battle to save it. Despite the building no longer existing, elderly participants fondly remembered it as they walked by the site. Grímur knew this old house well and was a frequent visitor: "I would love to be able to step into Fjalakötturinn today, just as I could back in the days. It had such a charm" (H-115). Several years after the demolition, a house was built on the same street, replicating the façade of the old building. However, Grímur finds little value in the replica, stating that "of course, it's not the same" (H-115). Pointing out that not only is the location different, but the mere replication of the façade fails to capture "the essence of the original". While the participants associated with the old building to different degrees, its former site and the replica serve to preserve the memory of the vanished house in some form. While some may be dissatisfied with the replica, it has nonetheless "found its way into local perception of the city's built heritage by way of borrowing (or stealing) memories from the original" (Rastrick 2016, 154).

Another example involves a house that lacks an exact location in the area. A house that only exists within the vague confines of Torfi's memory, leading him to find a stand-in for it. Torfi reflects on a story passed down by his father about his childhood, that he has shared with his daughters. This story recounts an incident where his father, while playing, accidentally fell through the basement window of a house near his home. Torfi, unable to recall the exact house where this event took place, says he just picks out one of the "nice houses with street-level windows", that resembles the one in his foggy recollection, when sharing "this story with [his] daughters" (H-113). In doing so, Torfi brings this substitute house to life in their imaginations. While some might view this as fabrication, alternatively, it can be considered a form of world-making. This perspective, as suggested by Ingold (2022), recognises Torfi's storytelling as a way to weave past narratives into the present, enriching his daughters' understanding of their ancestor's life and past times.

It is not just houses that have disappeared from the urban landscape, replicas, or substitutes that evoke the participants' perceptions. Of course, existing buildings, especially the old houses that are a defining feature of the city centre, readily provoke sentiments in the participants. They often expressed enchantment as they passed by such buildings, like Erna, who was struck by an old house along her path, referring to it as "one of those old, beautiful houses in Reykjavík." She believed the house captured "the romance of Reykjavík," exuding "a certain grandeur" (H-102). Her reaction reflects not only

her aesthetic perception, which is among the various facets of participants' experiences of the urban environment, but also an emotional response and a deep affection for and cultivated respect towards the city's built heritage – a sentiment widely shared among participants.

Recent years have seen a rise in new buildings, squeezed into spaces in established neighbourhoods that some participants eagerly wish to preserve. Among these participants was Bjössi, whose participation in the study was driven in part by his interest in the preservation of the tangible heritage of the city. He holds strong opinions on these issues, repeatedly decrying the tall new buildings among the city's older, lower-rise houses, during his walk. He vocally criticizes the insertion of the larger structures “almost on top of these old fragile buildings” and questions “how individuals with years of university education could even consider it”. Despite his criticisms, he finds “this dynamic intriguing” because it represents “a constant tension between the old and the new, and the contrasting aesthetics” (H-104f). Bjössi's feedback and observations were influenced by his encounters, yet he also commended the successes in the city's planning and preservation efforts. Notwithstanding being appalled by “planning disasters”, Bjössi professed that he enjoyed the walk because “walking around here is, after all, wonderfully delightful” (H-104). During the walk he shared his attitudes and feelings about conservation and planning but at the same time, he relished walking around, being in the moment and perceiving the environment and the atmosphere he felt in the city centre.

Urban Nature

Places where aspects of nature feature in the urban setting, particularly around Lake Tjörnin, seemed to have a magnetic effect on participants. Many shared sentiments and memories from this area, such as of ice skating in the winter or feeding the ducks. Bjössi, for instance, expressed a consistent sense of well-being near the lake, expressing an equally “good feeling, both in winter and summer” (H-104). Many participants perceive the vicinity of the lake as a natural jewel nestled within the urban landscape. Their stories highlight the symbiotic relationship between it and the surrounding city. The view southward from the lake, where a singular low-rise building stands, strikes Björg as emblematic of “the city's luminance,” asserting that “perhaps no other building captures Reykjavík's light quite as well” (H-108). As a relatively open space in the middle of the city centre, the area offers panoramic views of the surroundings and beyond. The lake is framed by stately old buildings, churches, an old elementary school, and a park. Further on, hills and mountains such as Mount Esja are visible to the north of the city. Inga, moved by the vistas of



Image 2. The view to the north over Lake Tjörninn in Reykjavík, where Mount Esja provides a background over the low-rise buildings of the city centre. Photo: Jóhannes Birgir Guðvarðarson, 2024.

Tjörninn, paused twice to admire and declare her “favourite viewpoint”, until reaching a third spot overlooking the neighbourhood where she lives. Here, her words carried added weight as she reiterated: “This is my favourite view, looking over there, over my neighbourhood. It’s beautiful here, yet I live on the other side” (H-106). While she holds the entire area dear, “her” neighbourhood has the greatest significance for her.

Erna unequivocally identified her preferred vantage point by the lake. She halted at a spot with a northward view over the lake and reflected:

For me, this is my city. It’s wonderful to have a place or a city that’s mine, where I belong or can return to, especially after wandering the world. To walk here, and wow, whether on a spring or summer evening, or especially when the days are short and the light lingers, or the days stretch on for long – there’s something uniquely special about it. That’s what makes this city extraordinary. And it endears itself to you. It possesses a subtle beauty, perhaps because it nurtures one. And perhaps it has shaped and moulded one. (H-102)

She expresses a sense a profound feeling of belonging, reflecting an intimate connection with the city as if it truly belongs to her. With Erna and several other participants, the attraction of this area is evident, associated with the convergence of nature and the built environment. The cityscape’s overall character is perceived through an interactive process between the participants and the environment.

The harbour in Reykjavík is another locale where nature significantly enriches participants' perceptions of their surroundings. Among those drawn to the harbour was Torfi, who noted that he frequently visits this part of the city when he "needs to be somewhere" where he "feels good" and can relax. He mused over the harbour's magnetic appeal despite having "never once tasted the salty sea or been out at sea" (H-113). Nonetheless, he expressed "a great sense of well-being there," while looking from the harbour across the water to the mountains emerging to the north. The recording glasses captured both his gaze and verbal expressions, illustrating the research method's advantage in combining visual context with participants' narratives.

As Lindal and Hartig (2015) note in a study with Icelandic participants, street vegetation promotes the likelihood of people experiencing psychological restoration. Our participants were attracted to areas that included natural elements, "how the trees interact with the buildings ... and cast shadows onto them", one participant commented (H-102) and another noted that "buildings are so bare without vegetation" (H-108). The importance of green spaces is a reoccurring theme among participants, who expressed their admiration for both the private gardens and public parks found throughout the city centre.

One such area is the old cemetery that many participants included in their walk. When Erna entered the cemetery, her sensory faculties were provoked as she observed that "the rain has ceased, the sky cleared," and it "smells, smells of summer" (H-102). She spoke of her regular visits to this "sanctuary", drawn by its qualities as "some sort of green space, a friend in the city, in the hustle. It's like entering another world... perhaps", she continued, "it's a refuge, a place to relax and to contemplate life and existence" (H-102) trying to transpose her perception of the atmosphere into words. Like so many other affective qualities or sensory experiences that are difficult to express verbally, or as Vannini (2024) states, capturing one of the perpetual challenges of sensory ethnography: "Atmospheres, after all, may be clearly felt by people but remain notoriously difficult to describe and make sense of through words" (12). There is something, be it its tranquillity, that attracted the participants to the cemetery. When entering the cemetery, Pétur refers to the serenity of the place and goes on to visit his grandparents' graves, who passed away before his birth. In his family, their memory is preserved through regular visits to this place, notably during the Christmas season. The cemetery thus occupies a unique place for him, offering a tranquil environment that "provides a sense of the flow of time and finality, memento mori," he reflects, suggesting that it is beneficial for everyone to contemplate these themes occasionally, "especially as one approaches middle age" (H-116).

Places of loved ones

For many participants, the walk through the city with the recording glasses evoked fond memories of family members and friends, some of whom had passed away. This highlights the profound significance of such reminiscences, which often constitute poignant elements in their narratives. As noted earlier, the surroundings at the outset of Torfi's walk stirred memories of his father. One street that Torfi traversed is deeply imbued with solemn memories of his father's sudden passing. Torfi had been informed of his father's death over the phone and had quickly made his way to his parents' house, living only a short distance away. He recalls the initial part of that walk as being in a haze, but then the predicaments became vivid as he turned into his parents' street, as he "stepped through some sort of portal, instantly". Torfi, who resides in the vicinity, often finds himself walking along this same path, and upon entering the street, that moment of clarity is "the first thing that springs to mind" (H-113).

On another part of his walk, Torfi walked past a house where he had spent countless hours in his youth engaged in music practice with friends, including one who lived there. From this place, he has "both very good memories and bittersweet ones," particularly because his friend, the homeowner, passed away suddenly a few years ago. Following his friend's passing, the house grew in importance in Torfi's heart because "somehow the memory locks in place and becomes stronger" (H-113) as a result, cementing that house to the memory of his friend.

Other participants, too, found memories of their loved ones surfacing as they navigated through the streets. For Stína, memories involving her recently passed mother repeatedly surfaced throughout the walk, indicating how she deeply associated her mother with the area. Several places along the route, the schools her mother had been to and "the Cathedral where [her] mother received her confirmation", provoked stories and incidents from her mother's life (H-103). In the follow-up interview, Stína agreed that the Cathedral had figured in various important events in her own life as well as in the lives of other family members and friends. Nonetheless, it was the thought of her mother that dominated her perception and thoughts as she passed by. Stína expressed surprise at the palpable presence of her mother's memory throughout the walk, something that had eluded her while she was immersed in the moment. Upon realizing this, she initially laughed, finding it "strangely funny," but then her tone shifted to a more contemplative one as she thought of her mother, sighing: "Ah, dear mom" (H-103f), her response capturing the emotional value vested in the memories that instantly emerged at different places on her route. The participants shared their memories of

loved ones through stories, which then came alive in their imagination and vivid in their minds.

Conclusion

Adopting a research method that enables us to understand how and why places from the past matter to people presents a significant challenge. We have embraced this challenge by utilising and developing three distinct research methods focused on observing individuals as they interact with the historic landscape of a city. These methods seek to assess how participants perceive their material surroundings and examine the affective qualities generated by the city. They are designed to allow researchers to observe participants' reactions, senses, and experiences through diverse and complementary lenses.

The advantages of employing different research methods include providing diverse insights into individuals' multisensory experiences. The methods used in this study all foster an embodied relationship between participant and place as documentation takes place in situ. Using audio-visual recording glasses for the self-led walks opens one avenue of access to people's perception of the environment while keeping the researcher's managerial influence at bay. By contrast, those partaking in walk-alongs engage in dialogue with the researcher, influencing their experience through his presence and interest. Additionally, focus group sessions encourage interaction within the group, facilitating negotiated understandings of places. While none of these methods can be seen to offer a holistic approach to people-place relations they may enhance each other.

The research method, which involves individuals navigating the urban landscape alone using recording glasses, provides valuable information because it gives a different kind of insight into the experiences of individuals than those that are more indebted to social interaction. It enables comparison between the negotiation that takes place in a social situation and what happens when the social stimulus is minimised, and individuals are left to wander alone with their thoughts and perceptions (albeit with the absent presence of the researcher as well as fellow pedestrians). The method may, for instance, incite a kind of intimacy that differs from the intimacy created in a researcher-participant dialogue. For instance, it seems unlikely that the presence of Stína's late mother, as discussed above, would have been felt to the same extent throughout her walk if a researcher had accompanied her. The solitude may thus be seen to shape the participants' engagement with place, guiding them through the environment and their embodied presence along familiar paths. Alone, the sensorial faculties are

facilitated differently as individuals delve into their perceptions, experiences, memories, contemplations, et cetera, in dialogue with the environment they are moving through.

However, this does not infer that analysing solitary engagements with place somehow gives better or more truthful access to people-place relations. Perceptions and narrations of relationships are always also constructed socially. Furthermore, as in interview situations, the method is limited to what people are willing to share, as demonstrated by Stína when she chose not to discuss her adolescent experiences of city centre nightclubs. The method is also limited to the spontaneous arousal of cognitive and sensorial actions and reactions at the moment of each engagement. Such moments are of course infused by a multitude of affective influences that may define each encounter with place. The absent presence of Stína's late mother characterised her walk with the recording glasses on the particular day of the walk. If that walk had taken place at another time, Stína's memory of her mother might not have come up at all.

In the follow-up interviews, there is still the opportunity to probe detailed questions to compensate for the researcher's lack of possibility of dialogue or impact during the walk. But these questions are still based on what has been captured in the recordings. As for the data accumulated in this study, the most valuable resources originate directly from the walks themselves, although the follow-ups gave additional explanations, enriching the narratives and further contextualising perceptions communicated in the recordings. Sometimes, the participants had even experienced moments during their solitary tours that were so profound that they felt compelled to share and discuss their experiences in detail in the follow-up interviews.

Special attention to how the participants experience their participation is beneficial, given the unusual situation of wearing recording glasses on their solitary walks. On the one hand, the situation led to feelings of oddity, while on the other, the "cap of invisibility" offered a certain security of detachment from the gaze of other pedestrians. While the participants received minimal instructions, it proved important to cultivate a relaxed atmosphere and help the participants feel at ease in approaching the task on their premises. It is useful to offer them tips such as pretending to be talking on the phone while walking and strategies for tackling unexpected incidents, like meeting acquaintances. Recognising the uniqueness of the participant's situation, their feelings, and experience of the walking process, helps the researcher to follow in the steps of the participant, in attempting to access the mindset and perceptions of the environment.

There are also practical drawbacks to the method to be considered, as identified in previous studies developing these methods (Cooke & Buckley 2021, 151). It is quite time-consuming for both researchers and participants. Participants undertake a walk of up to an hour, followed by a follow-up interview of a similar length at a later date, resulting in a substantial amount of material for transcription and analysis, compared to the walk-alongs. Additionally, reviewing the video recordings can be challenging due to the glasses moving in consonance with the wearer's head, resulting in considerable instability in the footage. This may induce nausea for viewers when watching intently. Technical issues, such as recording failures are also to be anticipated, although we fortunately avoided such problems.

Despite its limitations and the considerable time required, our experience suggests that the research method, wherein participants walk alone with recording glasses, significantly enriches methodologies aimed at examining people's relationships with the historic urban landscape. This method, highlighting various layers of information through the inclusion of detailed, nuanced descriptions of places, offers a means to capture an intimate, multi-sensory, and dynamic interaction with the environment. We can observe participants' aesthetic experiences – how sounds influence perceptions, smells evoke memories, and the atmosphere affects their experience in different locales of the city – enhancing our understanding of perception's role in the urban environment. The participants' mobility illustrated how various city locales prompted distinct responses and shaped their narratives concerning the environment. Their movements between places revealed connections between different life stages and specific locations, as they recounted memories from childhood and youth, and had moments of remembering deceased loved ones. These narratives uncovered a range of emotions, including loss, joy, and sadness. The participants' walks thus unveiled the multi-layered relationship that people form with the area, highlighting the capacity of urban spaces to evoke a complex tapestry of emotions, memories, and senses.

Ethical statement

The researchers are committed to ensuring that the preservation and usage of data strictly adhere to the scientific ethical guidelines set forth by the University of Iceland, as well as to broader ethical standards governing the management of scientific data.

Funding

The research presented in this article is funded by The Icelandic Centre for Research - IRF (Grant number: 228411).

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SOURCES

Fieldwork materials

Walk with audio-visual recording glasses in the city centre of Reykjavík and follow-up interviews. Interviewer in the follow-up interviews: Snjólaug G. Jóhannesdóttir.

- H-102. August, 2022. Erna, woman in her fifties.
- H-103. August, 2022. Stína, woman in her fifties.
- H-103f. August, 2022. Follow-up interview with Stína.
- H-104. August, 2022. Bjössi, male in his fifties.
- H-104f. August, 2022. Follow-up interview with Bjössi.
- H-105. September, 2022. Vera, woman in her thirties.
- H-106. September, 2022. Inga, woman in her fifties.
- H-107. September, 2022. Lárus, male in his forties.
- H-107f. September, 2022. Follow-up interview with Lárus.
- H-108. April, 2023. Björg, woman in her forties.
- H-109. April, 2023. Ólöf, woman in her sixties.
- H-110. May, 2023. Kolla, woman in her twenties.
- H-112. July, 2023. Eva, woman in her sixties.
- H-113. September, 2023. Torfi, male in his fifties.
- H-113f. October, 2023. Follow-up interview with Torfi.
- H-115. August, 2023. Grímur, male in his fifties.
- H-116. August, 2023. Pétur, male in his fifties.
- H-118. August, 2023. Egill, male in his forties.

The names of the participants are pseudonyms.

Research material: video and audio recordings, transcripts, and research journal, in the possession of the authors, stored at the University of Iceland.

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