

Civic media and technologies of belonging: where digital citizenship and ‘the right to the city’ converge

Abstract

This paper contributes to an emerging field of ‘urban communication’ research and its intersections with civic culture and digital citizenship. It does so by presenting a case study of how an activist group in North London’s Tottenham region, co-designed bespoke digital media platforms, akin to civic media, to advocate an approach to urban planning which also recognizes migrants’ rights. Conducted as a part of a broader participatory action research project, the study outlined here offers an analysis of the online and offline communicative routes taken, the urban rights enacted, as well as the visions expressed during an eight-week consultation period. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative metrics from the official and alternative digital platforms inviting consultation around the community-led planning application, the paper offers insights about the co-construction of space, and the effect that the particular site had in unearthing wider enactments of ‘the right to the city’ and affective belonging, alongside struggles against threats of displacement. By offering these insights the paper contributes to a better understanding of the digital mediation of belonging through space/place, and what this means for urban citizenship. Looking beyond processes of urban planning, this understanding seeks to contribute to wider debates of urban citizenship, often expressed at the intersection of urban rights, digital citizenship and virtual reality.

Keywords

civic media, place-making, urban rights, digital citizenship, migration, cities, place/space, belonging, virtual reality

Introduction

Scholars within media sociology have often argued that the social experience of urban space becomes increasingly subject to a ‘media-architecture complex’ (see Leurs, Georgiou, McQuire et al., 2015: 194-5). Unraveling the intersections of digital milieu of the city has become more urgent over the last decade, particularly as layers of specific migrant experiences are ever more prevalent in our understanding of both urbanity and mediation (see Hall, 2015). One way to begin this unraveling, is by shedding some light on perspectives on place- and media- making, precisely because such makings involve

not only expressions of identity and belonging, but also, enactments of civic, urban and digital rights.

Some applied researchers have combined place-making with ‘civic media’, a term used refer to the creative design of digital platforms that (could) work beyond territorial bounds of place to generate ‘structures and feelings of belonging to a community’ (e.g. Jenkins, 2007; 2011). Space can be a practiced place, in De Certeau’s (1984) words, composed of interactions of several elements. Yet what happens when place becomes a battleground of competing interests (see Harvey, 2012), as often is the case in urban redevelopment processes? How can feelings of community involve migrant transactions, rights and identities? Combining place-making and civic media then goes beyond deploying new media technologies/methodologies to animate civic imagination and creativity. This combination invites a connection of the social contexts whereby civic rights and digital creativity operate, and, of the cultural protocols that grow around the use of media – media which can be used to express urban struggles.

Inspired by critical discussions of media and diasporas and their intersections with urban and citizenship studies, this paper offers insights from a local activist group (Words Corner Community Coalition/WCC). For more than 10 years have been campaigned to halt the demolition of an iconic building called ‘Wards Corner’ and its adjacent, ethnically diverse ‘Seven Sisters market’ located in North London’s Tottenham. The discussion stems from reflections and analysis based on an action research project¹. Over the course of three years (2012-2015), I worked with WCC to advocate an alternative community plan through co-creating a civic media /digital infrastructure (*StickyWorld*). This combined 3D photography, augmented/virtual reality and commentary, alongside documents required in official planning processes. This paper draws on a multidimensional model of ‘civic culture’ (Dahlgren, 2009) that *instrumentalizes* a connection between urban and digital rights. As such, it aims to offer insights about the ways in which the building of urban citizenship can emerge in the digital age. Secondly, it sheds light on the modalities which local residents and traders used to negotiate place /space emotionally (Clough and Halley, 2007), within the *StickyWorld* platform, through narratives of belonging, through knowledge sharing and by expressing aspirations and fears. These processes were used to unearth the sense of the social and economic value within Wards Corner/Seven Sisters Market, which concurrently mobilized collective action as part of the local government’s planning processes. Such aspects were also later used for reclaiming an acknowledgement of migrant transactions in contested - and ongoing - redevelopment processes in other parts of London (e.g. Roman-Velazquez, 2014; King et al., 2018). More importantly, these transactions, I argue, further ‘animated’ micro-processes of recognition, which enriched links to mutual support networks, pertinent to Latin American communities in London. This paper thus contributes to a differentiated account of the constraints and opportunities affecting new forms of civic media, place-making and wider technologies of urban belonging. It also builds upon the methodological broadening of action research that utilizes an attention to digital resources as being intimately connected to historical contexts and social processes that go way beyond the digital.

Contextual background to the case

Since the mid 2000s, urban citizenship debates have taken two, sometimes opposing, but occasionally overlapping directions. The first, a normative one, largely registered in prescriptive practices akin to place-making, participatory planning (see Jones et al., 2015; Jupp, 2012), and ‘urban commoning’, whereby people and organizations seek to place themselves in harmonious consensus about urban futures. Several urban planning frameworks – namely the Neighbourhood Planning framework in England and similar projects in Canada, Australia and the US over the last 15 years – were initiated with the intention to give residents the opportunity to have a direct say on developments they would want to see in their area. Crowdsourcing through social media and ‘digital creativity’ has been often used as frame to construct motivating discourses for local governments and third sector organizations seeking to mobilize civically-aware residents for such neighbourhood-oriented agendas (e.g. Dovey et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2015), as who would act as ‘citizen sensors’ feeding back to local government and corporate interests. Instead, as Monno argues, being part of neoliberal strategic agendas, such projects may indeed feed the ‘systematic deregulation and the radical de-politicization of the urban space’ (2016: np). Certainly several academic-civic partnerships (see Jones et al., 2015; for a number of projects in Foth et al., 2011) have taken a more critical stance in co-creating digital tools to enable civic agency, by collective reporting, prioritising and envisioning, instead of mere (and often pointless) ‘consultations’. Even in those cases however concerns have been expressed as to the degree of influencing decision making and interventions. Other researchers have questioned the degree to which digital tools (often their own that they helped develop) help eradicate inherent inequalities in urban planning systems, which are committed to neoliberal agendas of growth, or indeed address broader questions of inclusion and representation (see Jones et al., 2015; McCall and Dunn, 2012, Raco, 2013). And many have expressed concerns over the ways in which ‘digital creativity’ and place-making are promoted as ‘elixirs’ for enacting urban and digital rights, and have urged for a refocus on the latent realities and social struggles of ethnically diverse populations (e.g. Zukin, 2009, Jacobsson, 2015).

The second direction involves a more radical agenda to grassroots urban activism, animated when localized struggles against gentrification and austerity which could extend to city-wide protests; cities within this context, incubate strategic spaces that anchor and drive large social movements (Nicholls and Vermeulen, 2012; Leontidou, 2010) or smaller scale contestations driving collective actions to counter urban transformations producing social segregation, expulsions and migrant displacement, erasure of public spaces and environmental destruction (Monno, 2016). By focusing on the narratives concerning feelings of injustice centered in the ‘city’, research literature on urban activism has offered insights surrounding the means *through* which the public can claim for relational resources in order to achieve other political ends (e.g. rights *to* the city, labour and civil rights, rights for migrants, etc). Yet although instilling the ‘urban justice’ frames to appeal for diversity and social inclusion across causes, such approaches often evade the prescriptive and legal patterns of planning practices and policies that they so desperately seek to change (Arampatzi and Nicholls, 2012). As Monno argues, “the recent wave of urban activism does not seem to have produced meaningful changes to

neoliberal urban transformation or offer an alternative urban imaginary to it” (2016: np/online).

The case presented here cuts across these two perspectives and I will elaborate further the way in which they have informed the conceptual framework for approaching the study and the co-creation of an ‘alternative urban imaginary’ in the next sections. In the remaining of this section I shed some more context in the particular case, using it as an example that brings to light some of the latent realities of diverse populations’ struggles to claim urban rights, through digital means. The study was situated with the activities of a grassroots community group, Wards Corner Community Coalition (WCC), made of local residents and traders campaigning to halt the demolition of Wards Corner - a city block above Seven Sisters Junction and Underground Station. This area of South Tottenham in London, hosted (at the time of research) an indoor market, comprising of 70 independent businesses, and residences, as well as the corner building, dilapidated Victorian former department store (Wards), which got a heritage value asset status in 2013. The area was predominantly made up of local independent traders from diverse ethnicities (mainly Afro-Caribbean, Turkish, Asian and South American). The site of the indoor market comprised (as of 2014) 36 separate units of which 64% of traders originated from South America (largely Colombia) and were Spanish speaking. Pueblito Paisa, also known as ‘Latin Village,’ a café and community hub was tucked inside the former department store, making it a destination for London’s growing South American population (see also, Roman-Velazquez, 2014). ‘Latin village’s’ feel had spilled over the entire indoor market.

Tottenham is part of London Borough of Haringey, the fourth most deprived borough in London and one of the most diverse areas of the UK, with 65.3 % of its population being non-British White (Haringey Council, 2014). In February 2011 *Time Out*, a London publication devoted to listings and culture, described Tottenham’s booming creative industries scene and convivial counterculture, conjuring up the spectre of imminent gentrification. Since the August 2011 riots however, the area has been subject to stigmatising narratives (Wacquant et al., 2014), provoking an almost punitive regeneration of Tottenham (Peacock, 2014), which has involved a series of formal consultations for large-scale public and private investments.

Rooted in principles of participatory planning and community-led design, WCC predates these developments. Formed in 2007, it has described itself as a grassroots group. It had been working to produce an alternative proposition for the Wards Corner heritage building and the adjacent commercial and residential block. These were co-owned by TfL (Transport for London) and Haringey Council. Unlike a competing commercial plan (produced by Grainger PLC), the WCC plan had claimed that it would allow the existing traders to remain, retaining the migrant micro-economies and the livelihoods for the ethnic minorities of the site (see Design and Access Statement /Planning Application, 2013: 20-32)².

My multifaceted engagement with WCC commenced in September 2012, and the multi-method approach to action research, which informs this paper, was conducted between October 2012 and July 2014. Being part of a larger research team, I worked

collaboratively with core members of WCC to devise a four-stage approach to participatory action: a) exploration and planning, b) co-production, c) reflection and 4) analysis of outcomes (see Foulger, 2010: 142; Reason and Bradbury, 2008). This involved co-exploring the social conditions and digital infrastructures required to enact rights claims, as well as stories and commentary by the wider local community of residents and traders. As I will explain later in the methodology section, part of this framework involved co-producing a digital tool or civic platform that would remediate the ‘co-designed’ (Sanders and Stappers, 2014) community-led planning application produced by WCC. What was aimed also was to inspire both residents and traders, and other peripheral members of WCC, to become more skilled users of media tools as means for growing digital literacy and developing critical awareness of the decision-making processes akin to urban and digital citizenship.

Linking digital visualizations to WCC’s and other local community media infrastructures as means for participatory planning and for enacting urban rights, was one the core aims of the project presented here and was certainly central in first two stages of the process I described above. In both stages of co-production and mostly in reflection and analysis, affective stories of belonging emerged and were promoted as central components for claiming rights in both digital and urban realms. I discuss these aspects further in the following sections. I begin the next section with a conceptual exploration of how space-place has been linked with theoretical traditions ranging from media and diasporas and then turn to critical citizenship studies so I can further elaborate on the conceptual design of the study: how rights can instrumentalize a novel model of civic culture/media.

Theoretical perspectives: place, space and intersections of digital, urban and migrant rights

As I mentioned in the previous section, initial immersion to the literature of urban activism and participatory planning, revealed gaps in terms of engaging with place for enacting spatial justice and for claiming rights through the city through digital and mediated means. I now draw from interrelated threads of research that cross across boundaries of space-place, belonging and the *digitally mediated enactments* of rights to tease out the dimensions to both digital creativity and citizenship.

Phenomenological approaches to social geography maintain the close relationship between place and space, arguing for a dialectic structure of human experience, “since our understanding of space is related to the places we inhabit, which in turn derive meaning from their spatial context” (Seamon and Sowers, 2008: 44). This power of place to order human intentions, experiences and actions ‘spatially’, is reciprocal. In Lefebvre’s words, “the concept of space links to the mental and the cultural, the social and the historical...” and it has too the power to reconstitute complex processes that include *discovery, production and creation* (of landscapes, and of the city) (2003: 2009). Space is then real, virtual or imagined. Inspired by these perspectives, Georgiou (2010) makes a compelling case for reconceptualizing migrant identities in the city, calling for a more intimate connection of place, media and space, which can allow human subjects to get

informed, and communicate with others, about ways of being and becoming. Drawing on critical geography, new media and migration studies, Leurs (2015) also offers empirical insights and cartographic analyses of how urban migrant youth have used popular social media platforms as ‘digital passages’ to perform hybrid identities over transnational and local spaces. The city is then a key analytical category that raises questions about the ways in which we manage identity boundaries and spatial constellations, but also the how we figure out, what Amin calls, ‘an urban politics of living with difference’ (2012: 63).

Profoundly integrated in any form of social life in the city, space is present in any exercise of power surrounding (urban) citizenship. Urban power struggles, antagonisms and grievances can become more intensified (see Massey, 2005; Harvey 2006; 2012): not only particularly because they capture the links to, and the tensions between, the cultural and the political spheres of representation, but also, because they reveal stories about emotional experiences of belonging and rights to belong. Inspired by these perspectives, Amrith (2015) discusses low-income migrants’ urban citizenship pathways to Sao Paolo and offers insightful analyses of localized claims for the more generalized rights to personal security and dignity in urban life. King et al. (2018) have provided evidence from recent (and, similarly, ongoing) struggles in the context of redevelopment of central London, and the threat that they have posed to the spatial and social value forged by micro-economic activities of migrant (largely South American) transactions.

Linking space – as it is broadly conceptualized in terms of discovery, production and creation, but also conflict – to cultural and political representation leads us then to a more reflective understanding of citizenship. This is an understanding of citizenship not just in terms of territorial boundaries, nationhood and formal politics, but in terms of *civic acts*, of *rights claims* and of *claims of belonging* to various groups and communities. The concept of enactment is crucial here. Isin (2009, 370) writes that ‘citizenship is enacted not only as membership, but also as claims [...]’. What are the communicative resources at play to understand the enactment of those rights claims that may define activist or civic cultures? Rooted in the sociology of collective action as well as political communication, Dahlgren (2009) proposes a model of civic agency, what he calls ‘civic culture’, involving a ‘circuit’ of six interlocking dimensions of mutual reciprocity that condition processes of political participation: knowledge, values, affinity/trust, practices, identities and discussion/spaces. Spaces are both physical and digitally mediated for Dahlgren, conceived both as *sites for encounter* and as *places for communicative exchange*. [Digital] creativity can then develop through practices, stories and knowledge [of] practices and identities, which are closely intertwined’ (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 118). These stories and identities have a strong *emotional* content, inviting media researchers to analyse the effects of civic media on civic agency.

As I noted in the introduction, instrumentalizing informal media resources and digital creativity to make rights claims about urban place(s), has been at the core of the project discussed here. Such resources maybe indeed vested in the ‘radical ordinariness’ of using Twitter and Facebook, mailing lists and online and hyperlocal media forums to express vernacular voices and pleas for recognition (e.g. Leurs and Georgiou, 2016; Dovey et al., 2016); or they may involve transverse borders that transgress or creatively subvert regulatory and corporate orders to call for remaking of the city from below (see

Purcell, 2003; Nyers and Rygiel, 2012). Some scholars have linked the model of civic culture to ‘creative citizenship’ and ‘digital citizenship’ (Hargreaves and Hartley 2016), bringing to the fore new emphases on the creative capacity civic *actors* mobilize when sharing knowledge through digital media and the potential that this knowledge sharing has to drive change (see Alevizou et al, 2019).

In order to understand this capacity to drive change however, a clearer explanation of citizenship, conceptualized as the enactment of *civic acts* and *rights claims*, is important. Isin and Ruppert distinguish between a ‘rights bearing’ subject, a recipient of entitlements, and a “ citizen subject [who] performatively come into being by the act of saying and doing something - whether through words, images, or other things” (2015: 156). What’s more, Isin and Ruppert make a convincing proposition whereby they link digital citizenship, understood as the enactment of *rights claims* through the Internet and online media, with *speech acts*, such as: *forming judgments, making commitments, requesting acknowledgements, or clarifications* (Austin, 1962). The key then is to what extent, what *is* imaginable, sayable or doable follows or exceeds social conventions that govern a situation or engender a particularly reality. These notions are important for operationalizing creative capacities and enacting rights through civic media.

By presenting the WCC case, I aim to offer a slice of what may constitute a political understanding of place-making through urban activism; this is used as a means for operationalizing the (digital) claiming of urban rights in order to *enact* migrant identities and urban subjectivities. Addressing some of the dimensions of civic culture (see above) the processes of co-creating a digital platform (i.e., StickyWorld, see next section) were deployed with a view to enable participants to make *rights claims* and *act collectively* as a response to urban governance/planning. This means to enable participant local residents /traders to *devise, report, envision, form judgments and acknowledgments*, as urban activists, around a counter proposal, community-led planning application. These claims depended, also, upon conditions of digital agency (and citizenship), which could be enacted, based upon the residents’/traders’ capacity to resist power structures around urban policy – power structures that had often downplayed the context of migrant micro-economies. When this context is discussed within media-city-diaspora and place-making frameworks, the relationship becomes more captivating, particularly as civic agency flows through mediated relations that reveal particular affective stories of belonging; such stories further enact spatial and relational modalities and the sharing of affective story claiming (see Thrift, 2004; Graham-Gibson, 2006; Clough and Halley, 2007). I discuss these more as an analysis of outcomes in the final section.

Certainly, the reciprocal influence of digital environments and social life is vested primarily in social media’s capacity of story-telling and in the, often, contagious spreadability and affective resonances (e.g. Papacharissi, 2014; Tettegah, 2016). My conceptualization of affectivity here does not convene across networks that are discursively rendered out of mediated interaction exclusively. Rather, I focus on the modalities of a digitally mediated visual environment, which was bespoke and co-designed with WCC to animate urban rights claims, through developing an atmosphere of affinity – an atmosphere that unearthed, to some extent, stories of affect and cultural

belonging. This, also consequently, enabled some emotional resonance and alignment (see Dövellig et al., 2018), as I will demonstrate in the final section.

Methodological frameworks

As I noted in background section, I devised a participatory action research framework (Reason and Bradbury, 2008) with the aim to co-explore the social conditions and digital infrastructures required to enable WCC to enact rights claims and narrative exchange with the wider local community, the local authority and TFL.

The overall multi-method approach yielded data from: A 9-month participant observation of group meetings (at Pueblito Paisa); 6 focus groups (using conventional and asset mapping methods, see Alevizou et al., 2016a; Ryan et al., 2014; Hogan et al., 2007) with mixed ethnically male and female participants (prior, during and after the co-production processes). These aimed to unravel connections between personal and collective narratives and goals as well as to provide insights about networks, relationships and shared resources. In co-producing stages, cursory analyses of WCC's digital and visual contents and social media channels informed the iterative design for the digital platform, and a user and public engagement campaign following the launch of the digital planning platform, which in turn yielded more data about the digital and urban claims. Finally in the reflection and analytical stages, baseline statistical and qualitative analysis of commentary stemming from the planning application both in the official, Harringey Council, Platform in the digital VR planning site (*StickyWorld*). Crucially, the report from *StickyWorld* was supplied as additional evidence supporting WCC's Planning Application, which led to its approval in April 2014.

Whilst asset mapping² and narrative techniques allowed for different stories to be told, as well as goals and resources to be unearthed, baseline analyses of the group's visual and social media revealed several aspects about the identity of the place and the urgency of the shared struggle. Both these aspects gave initial insights about shared stories and collective aspirations - also summarized in WCC's planning application - which were fed back in the co-production process. In the next sub-section, I will unpack on processes of asset mapping, offering also some detail about the ways in which WCC existing digital and social media stock was strategically re-used to remediate the community plan in a visual interactive platform. I then turn to analytical insights on the types of participants, baseline themes and the visual narratives stemmed from the commentary that emerged during the 8-week consultation process (February - March 2014).

Remediating a community plan from existing communication assets

As part of the premise of this action-research project was the co-production of civic media to assist with urban action. Asset based methodologies often used within urban and community informatics research to inform the design of civic as well as locative media (for conceptual details see endnote 2; Alevizou et al., 2016a; Foth et al., 2011). A

combination of group discussion methods with creative and hands-on techniques (such as props, cartography, visual story-telling, mental mapping, etc) were used as means for unearthing stories or ideas about participants' values, cultural associations and perceptions of value. In addition to identifying the community-led planning application as an important component of the campaign, participants pointed to communication assets or infrastructures which also included digital components of the contested site (the market and adjacent building), the wider area, and, the campaign itself. These 'assets' were often linked to positive spaces for social interaction and communal histories (c.f., Ball-Rokeach and Kim, 2013; Dalgren's notion of spaces/discussion). Such 'assets' and stories were then fed back to the coproduction processes and were used for animating ideas about a digital medium, which could be more consciously *enacted* to express urban rights advocated in the alternative planning application. Reusing existing 'communicative skills and assets' (or, to use Dalgren's principle, resources from media practices) from the group's media 'stock' and re-invigorating links to existing networks became central components of the co-production processes.

WCC's websites and social media (Facebook and Twitter) were among such 'assets'. According several members of WCC, most valued media contents included: a) a series of Vox pop films outlining emotional stories and shared experiences from residents and traders of the site; b) a series of panoramic 360 degree photographs of the indoor market and, c) a set of scaled up drawings and 3D computer generated images (CIGs) which were designed as part of the planning application in order to communicate the future vision of the building and the aura of re-furbished market. This visual content – now common place in the commercial marketing of urban redevelopments – was designed pro-bono by an architectural designer and active WCC member, in attempt to professionalize and legitimize the community-led planning application. Similarly, the group had praised their links with local media, and had stressed their role in advocating relational assets (Graham-Gibson, 2006; Alevizou et al, 2016a), i.e. links with similar campaigns or other groups. These were online hyperlocal, social forum sites (e.g. *Harringay Online*); local newspapers (e.g., *Haringey Independent*), ethnic newspapers and social media sites, from *Latin Village*, as well as broader links with the community networks and associations played a role, like *Our Tottenham*, *Pedro Achata Trust*, *Latin American Forum UK*, *Federation of Small Businesses*.

Two key components came to mind here in co-planning how a digital platform could mediate the community plan (aka community-led planning application) instrumentally. Firstly, how the official plan could be refashioned into a platform that would be more immersive, accessible and participatory, and second, how could the existing media assets could be *aggregated* in a converging digital platform that would both subvert and [re]formalize a set of processes that would act as (inter)mediators between the local traders, residents and the Council's planning department. While the documents constituting a planning application (often spread in tens or hundreds of pages), may not necessarily constitute conventional conceptions of media, I would argue that the aggregate contents and the comments in both the community plan and the activist groups' digital media channels, constituted the basis for revising and re-visioning their proposals of the a community-led urban plan. It is this sense of the creative *remediation* and *re-purposing* (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 44-50) of planning and communication

assets, as I discuss below, which offered some sense of agency and an aspiration for improving the formal processes of urban planning consultations.

Reusing contents from WCC's social media and planning application (e.g. panoramic photographs, CGIs) was key not only because they unraveled the historical and social anatomy of place, but also, because they could be rendered with appropriate digital tools to project a vision of the future in more direct and immersive ways than in the official planning documents. What's more, during co-creation discussions, an urge came forward by WCC members advocating the social design of a digital planning tool, which would be inviting the local residents and the migrant traders to make rights claims by *envisioning* and *commenting*. The idea then grew to build a spatial project using existing media assets like 360 VR photography (current market/site) and rendered CGIs (future design of the market) which would also involve conversational layers (comment on plan). Given the technical complexity of such ideas, a commercial digital platform *StickyWorld* was chosen as a) it shared commonalities with mixed and virtual reality; b) it could combine three elements of digital techniques used in public consultations: *consulting*, *reporting* and *visioning* (see above and Jones et al. 2015: 326). The platform was adapted by the author and a technical researcher and two members of WCC to:

- a) give enough information [i nodes, in figure 1 below],
- b) to *develop the space for visual narratives* [see also figure 4] (as the users virtually 'walked around' the panoramic views of space),
- c) to prompt discussion³.

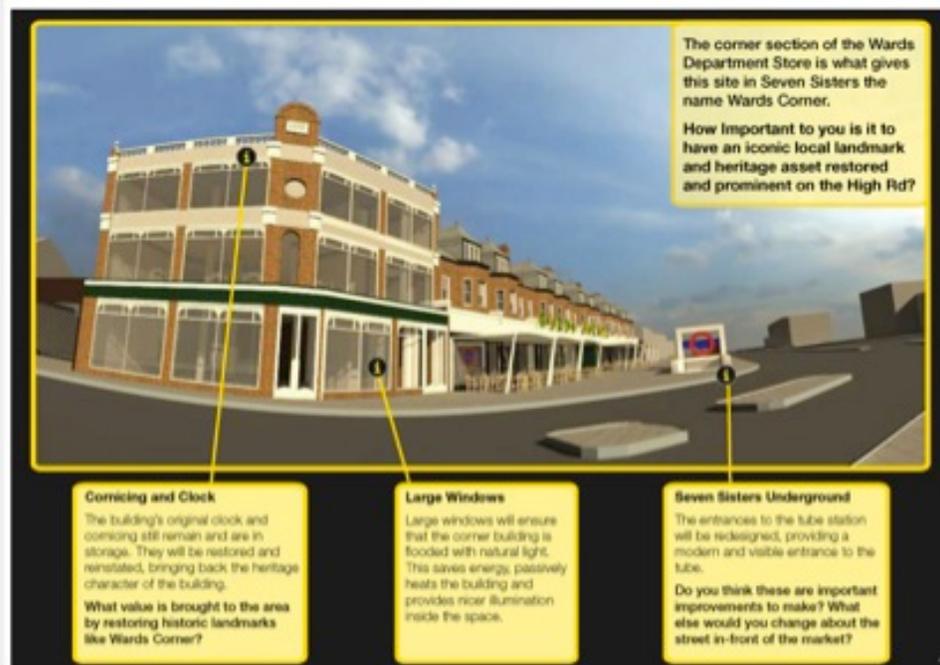


Figure 1: CGIs on StickyWorld: informational nodes in the community plan (Section: Corner building)

As such, discursive tropes [see an example in figure 4] sought to subvert from official planning documents and invite encounters, feedback, and critical reflections on the material, using two temporal distinct states of the built and entrepreneurial environment: I) the current state of the market hall and the building and II) the future projections of the building and the market that were part of the community-led planning application. The visual modalities of the projected tour in future modalities involved a staging that promoted an invitation to make *rights claims* (see themes about speech and citizenship acts in the theoretical section, Isin and Ruppert, 2015; Austin, 1962). The setting for enacting those ‘urban’ rights claims in a digital space sought to extend the generic techniques used in public consultations (visioning, commenting) via:

- reporting through *informational data* (i nodes)
- inviting *judgments* (characterizing);
- inviting the *forming of commitments*;
- *inviting ideas about common decision makings* (pledging)
- *inviting the* sharing of stories about the meaning / effect of space /place

Physical and online interactions were then planned *to facilitate the process* leading to a community-led consultation alongside the official consultation following the submission of the community-led planning application to Haringey Borough of London in the Spring of 2014.

Certainly the integration of the official 115-page planning application within the Council’s planning website invited urban citizens to comment as *recipients* of rights and entitlements: to provide feedback, to ask for clarifications and to offer pledges of support or rejection. The staging of the plan as a virtual tour allowed for visual commentary however, emphasizing that *place* could be correlated with *subjects* (users, visitors, residents, traders) *who can act to make claims*, and whose experiences, stories, memories, fears and aspirations about the realities of the place could be made visible.

Analysis of outcomes

Findings from the digital consultation

A concerted effort of engagement, a sort of ‘tactical mobilisation’ was orchestrated to invite an understanding the process of planning, as well as the relevance of the alternative plans, mediated in *StickyWorld* (SW) and the Council’s website, culminated on several events, and promoted through booklets, and in social and hyperlocal media. Often these worked side-by-side with the digital platform of *StickyWorld*, whose technical shortcomings (e.g., requirement for high bandwidth, time to familiarise and the necessarily moderation and prompting, both online and offline) were often compensated

by the immersive experience of interacting with the panoramic digital visualisations. As one commentator noted:

‘This site (SW) really allows you to step *inside* the Community Plan for Wards Corner, getting a first-hand look at a new vision for the site created by local people’.

259 ‘official’ responses, containing a total of 140 comments were submitted to the Council’s online portal, along with 63 responses, containing 227 comments. The latter did not initially constitute ‘official’ status, partly because some were duplicates from same individuals, but were accepted due to the value of content and commentary. About 98% of the responses were endorsements to the plan (see figure 2).

Looking at some demographic baseline information, the majority of respondents in the official platform were residents and market traders and representatives from local civic organizations (85%), with visitors to the market/area and respondents from wider London taking a lower percentage. This also included civil society organizations and advocates of migrant groups, comprising also of *Latin Elephant*, a charity from the Elephant and Castle shopping centre, which also hosts a large South American Community of Traders (although officially closed in Summer 2020). A total of 27 entries were submitted with comments in Spanish (from market traders).

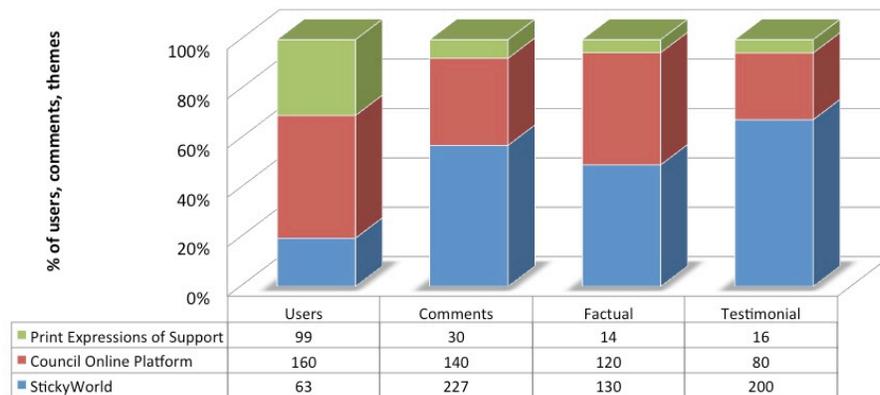


Figure 2: Total number of comments

Following a discourse-oriented thematic analysis to identify base-line themes and types of claims, I deployed analyses of comments that combined pragmatic and semantic elements to identify correlations in sentiments and speech acts (Austin, 1962; Hausser, 1980; Roberts, 2004). Endorsements yielded two principal types of commentary that relied on mainly factual and/or testimonial acts of reporting and pledging respectively. Although it was evident that SW engaged users to immerse (at least superficially) into the digital vision of the space, which triggered testimonial narratives of identity and

belonging (comments, ranged from 15-200 words), commentators didn't really engage in conversations. As commentators then turned to pledging to the official forms within the Council's online planning platform, they often repeated their testimonies through factual endorsements. Occasionally contributions in the official platform were longer, with rights claims combining factual, anecdotal and confessional modalities of affinity which revealed deeply emotional memories and pleas for the 'right to remain' (in the market), the 'right to belong'. Although space limitations do not allow to offer a comprehensive analysis of the entire data set of commentary, here I focus on the visual-verbal aspects of SW interactions, particularly because they represent composites from a network of aesthetic and affective modalities I also outlined in the previous section: the heritage and social aspects of the market and a layered provisionality in the *imagined* revival of the building. Almost 60% of the 226 comments on SW (received mostly through a three week intensive engagement period between mid February to late March 2014) expressed an 'affective' element with the space and its potential regeneration, the existing 'place identity' expressed a sense of aspiration emerging from migrant experiences and the opportunity to vocalize. Individuals offered new meanings by relating the 3D images to their existing personal experiences or knowledge and wider cultural discourses. In what follows, I focus on three types of claims characterizing enacting of rights like 'endorsement /pledging' that featured across factual and testimonial comments in the digital platform of SW, which also reflect the wider context of the consultation.

Claims, judgments and stories: Affinity as Aspiration, anxiety as despair

Users related the images to their existing knowledge and wider debates of regeneration and also to experiences of migration. What emerged from the commentary, and pledges of support was often a spatially sensitive story of affinity as well commitments that were closely linked with the ethnic making of Tottenham and of the market, both of which were juxtaposed with sentiments of aspiration and anxiety (see figure 3 below).

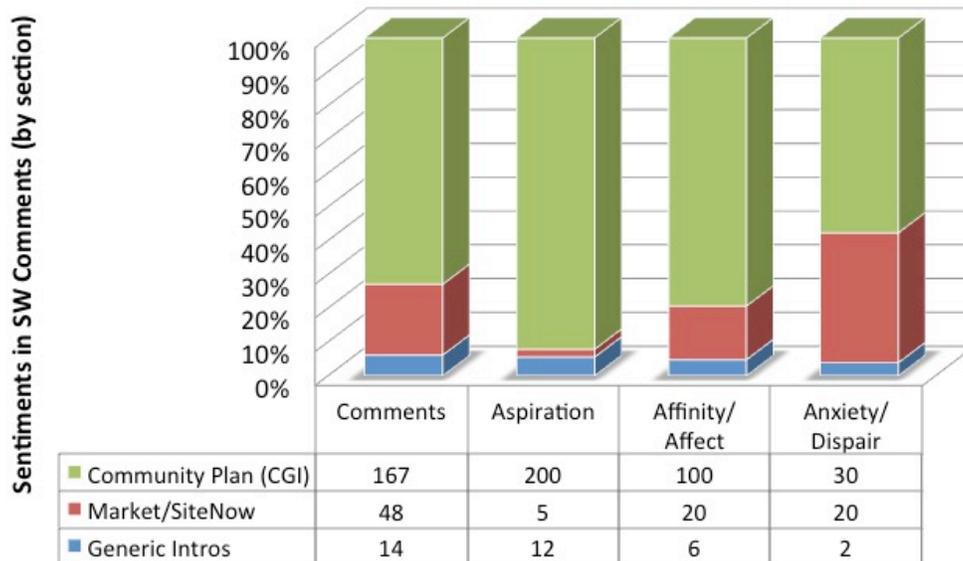


Figure 3: Baseline Themes

If we were to understand this process of the remediation (the digital mediation of the community plan on *StickyWorld*) as a form of progressive politics akin to creating a more inclusive vision of the place, then affinity was expressed in three principal ways:

- **Affinity to the project** – a community-led vision of regeneration and inclusivity, or a sense of preservation of the aura of the area with its social and economic diversity
- **Affinity with the group Wards Corner building/space and WCC** – many expressed a sense of solidarity with the ‘campaign’ as the plan was the frontrunner of a longer history against displacement and profit-led gentrification. Several residents offered judgments about wider contentious issues surrounding political participation and injustices in the planning system
- **Affinity to the market/ marketers** – this pointed to a more direct sense of belonging, the social identity of the space and a shared consciousness built from shared experiences of migration and conviviality

Through the transgression from digital to physical spaces, interacting with the current and the projected view of the site, participants shared rights claims around aspiration, affinity and anxiety which were further animated during the event of the ‘consultation’: this events brought forward what the ‘contingently obligatory’ elements that constituted the meaning of a building, such as ‘production, inhabitation, materialization, management and dissolution’ (see, Kraftl, 2010: 329) with declarations of rights to belong and becoming part of the future. Elizabeth Grosz, suggests a notion of ‘becomings’ for a building’ (2001: 7). As such, images from the projected frontage and

the future market triggered visions of the future which often were linked to architectural and emotional realities of diversity, of and caring (as opposition to gentrification) and of nostalgia about 'home' (see figure 4):

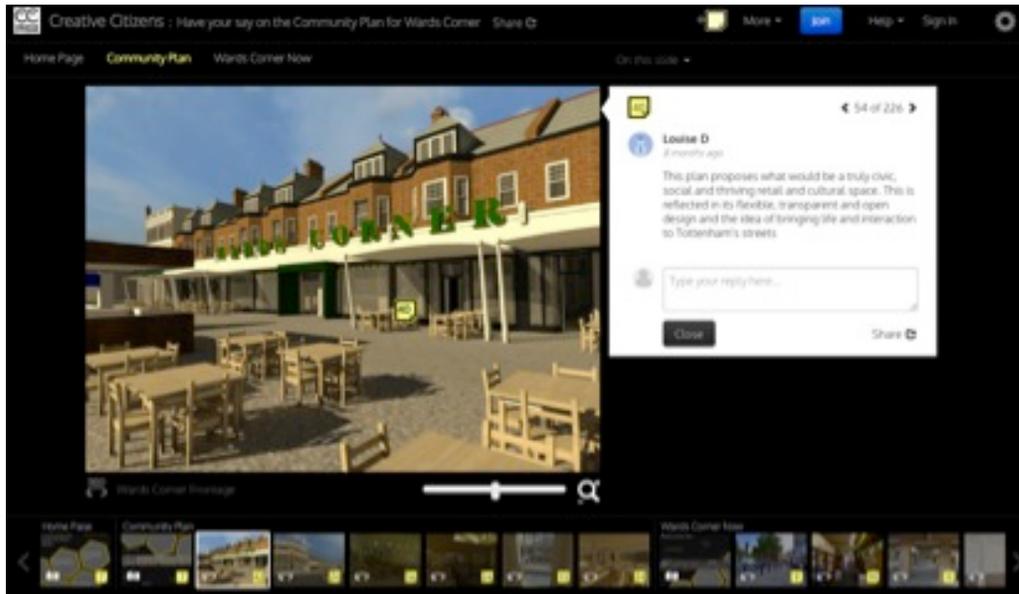


Figure 4: Interactive virtual tour to Community plan [Exterior detail]

In some comments then the efforts of the 'local community' were conceived both in terms of the preservation of the existing cultural diversity and in terms of regeneration of the built environment:

'I would like to see space for local talent and artists to perform, like in Covent Garden. The building has this approach, the interior has historical assimilation between the Caribbean and Latin communities and the English'.

'Becomings' also constituted the negotiating of components that juxtaposed broader forces of gentrification and oppositional corporate plans. A couple of Colombian traders commented:

'Caring for the buildings rather than neglecting them would give local businesses and local people more confidence in the area.... At Wards Corner there is the potential to combine investment in historic buildings with supporting a specialist and unique local economy. These pictures are great for showing what could be possible!'

‘Yes - building the aspiration around drawing in chain-stores like the Grainger plan is clearly wrong headed - it's done nothing at all for Wood Green, the high street doesn't work like this any more. [I]t's the local entrepreneurs that we should be providing space for; they make a place distinctive and give it identity’.

The visual content of the future market in the virtual tour often triggered emotional commentary which went beyond just the restoration of the building /space. In some cases visual images and the spatial imaginary of the ‘virtual tour’ were made meaningful because they triggered personal and emotional memories and experiences of marketplaces (‘village square’, ‘piazza’) that linked to nostalgia: A local trader (also proclaimed candidate councilor in the then local elections) commented that the exterior rendered images elicited memories from his village square (see visual on figure 4), and offered a commitment to the pledge a vision of the market that would bring ‘home’ from afar.

In other comments, ‘place’ was meant as a site for different kinds of ‘migrant’ investments. A wine and beverages trader of Afro-Caribbean origin stressed the connection among several migrant micro-economies and a pledge for a growing network of support and socio-cultural value. This strong sentiment of support and the evidence that the market functions as a hub of informal network of care, important for the Latin American community, who’s been the most vocal during the planning consultation:

‘To have a space here would allow Pedro Achata Trust to be more effective in supporting initiatives and providing advice. We support people who are interested in being self-employed and having their own businesses, third sector social enterprises. We are already doing this within the market, especially from Pueblito Paisa because it is more visible’.

‘It really would be important for Pedro Achata Trust to have a space in the Wards Corner building because Seven Sisters is one of the two main places for the Latin American community in London - alongside Elephant and Castle’.

‘It is the only place you hear people speaking Spanish. Here, people say hello to each other, say good morning to each other as soon as they come in. I've always thought, if they knock down this place, I might as well go back to Colombia. I've been here all my life, but when we opened the butcher, this market became like my home. Here you socialize with other people, you bring your kids, they play around with other people's kids. This doesn't happen in Costa!’

These comments present insights of affinity and the meaning of place attached to wider networks of support and care that would later become prevalent also in other struggles that occurred in London (between 2014-2019). Reporting on the more recent redevelopment plans for Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre in South London and the

risks of displacement, Velazquez (2014) and King et al. (2018) also stress the diverse infrastructure of markets and the social value vested in informal networks of care and support, particularly pertinent to Colombian and other central and South American traders. One of the advocates for the Latin Village charity, and a former Colombian refugee, mentioned several invisible clusters in our interview before commenting:

‘It is very important to give a new change here in Seven Sisters market and we have been working with a support group for the Latin American community in order to promote the Latin American culture, not only the exchange of products but also sociability which we want to integrate with the English community. We want to help each other, to integrate with the English community, we want to offer to our own community skills and capacities to this country’.

Through geo-imaginary we see how a spatially sensitive story was delivered. It became a story that attracted attention to specificities, witnessing and symbolic power vested in emotional memory and in actions that could have tangible outcomes: making space to perform identity through multicultural conviviality; aspiring to establish roots, to create a destination, not a passing through route (cf. Velazquez, 2014: 29).

In parallel with the many processes of lived and material becomings for the site, the [then present] state of the market and the images of disrepair on the second floor of the heritage building, there was also a discursive and political context in which the site /and the current market could be overtly claimed and positioned. Many expressed doubt on whether the less visible emotional and social investment undertaken by Latin American and other migrant networks would be having a place in the possible (and competing) transformation of Seven Sisters, which would be akin to the corporate transformation proposed Centre. And while aspirations for a better place were high on everyone’s agenda, these were too tempered by issues around affordability, or whether the existing community could be entirely ‘cohesive’.

One of the principal aims of the WCC campaign was to re-engage with a broader coalition of local networks and associations. This was made possible through launching this digital platform and through public/user engagement events, which enabled significant input from migrant market traders. Following the approval of the community plan in April 2014, an aura of optimism prevailed and a Development Trust (*Seven Sisters Development Trust*) was formed by a section of WCC members to raise funds that finance the materialization of the community plan. Over the last five years, and while WCC campaign still exists, The Trust has been working closely with the market traders who rekindled links with *Latin American UK Forum* and *Pedro Achata Trust* (an organization promoting sustainable businesses) and has formed mediated solidarities with the Elephant and Castle (E&C) campaign (through social media campaigns and a series of narrative films). Together the two campaigns/site would develop a shared sense of attachment, a sense of ownership in the transformation of both Seven Sisters and E&C into “thriving Latin Quarters”. These developments perhaps challenge existing frameworks of diversity and integration that see immigrants as ‘marginalized others’ and outsiders of established communities (e.g. Ahmed, 2004), even as their battles continue and their rights claims cross physical and digital spaces. Following Haringey Council’s

Planning Committee approval of the competing corporate plan by Grainger Developer, the demolition of Wards Corner is now (as of 2020) imminent and the wider grassroots and advocacy groups continue their legal fights. Although the campaign to save Latin Village – recognized by the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UN Human Rights Commission, 2017) – had received wide media attention (see Worley, 2017) – it became just another story among the many changes sweeping London following the years after 2017.

It would be naïve to claim that co-creating an immersive platform was the only tool for engaging diverse participants in creative and digital acts of urban citizenship. But in the process of subversion, reclaiming the space through an informal, visually immersive, digital platform, led a community to become more energized about making their rights claims more visible and thus recognized within wider urban and migrant struggles that feature persistently in London, a London that is framed as global city (Purcell, 2003). To this end, I agree with Scott McQuire in finding Saskia Sassen's *Territory, Authority and Rights* (2006) particularly helpful for thinking about the articulation of digital and non-digital as a dynamic process, but also a process that reveals additional tensions surrounding digital and participatory literacies. I too found that certain relations (scales, institutional formations, social actors) maybe weakened, or destabilized, while other previously informal, or emergent relations become more formalized and, often, more mainstream.

Conclusion

The co-creation of the plan on *StickyWorld* (and the subsequent engagement practices leading to the (re)constitution of a Community Trust), provided an opportunity for linking both production and consumption, informal and formal civic activities, and played a crucial role for brokering roles between these dimensions. More so, it offered an opportunity to showcase place, not as an empty continuum, but rather, as something filled with people and actions whereby local lived ways of life, and visual raw materials could be re-produced through human voices expressing their 'rights to belong' and interactions to provide stimuli for civic creativity, inspiration, and a more politicized 'urban place-ness'.

If we need to think of an inclusive conception of place-making and the political praxis of media in the city, this may include a conception of both civic creativity and civic rights, as mutually conditioning space – affectively, materially, socially and mediated. Six years on, and in the midst of the Covid-19 Pandemic, the battles to save the Wards Corner Building and market have become, paradoxically, both silent and more intense, with local groups of BAME traders and residents gaining ground within other global struggles (e.g. Black Lives Matter), yet losing the battle to keep parts of trading floors open. In September 2020, Transport for London (TfL), the organization owning the corner building, announced that it would permanently close storage facilities within the market and limit the activities of 'Latin Village. restaurants, adding another blow to the trading livelihoods of the market.

In this paper I sought to locate the praxis of local activist groups and community associations as they occurred a few years ago, and as they were situated in the ways in which they co-produced digital urban media and technologies of belonging; such media and technological tools were not only used for conceptualizing and connecting with space, but also, as ways to (re)claim the social identity of, and rights to, claim a place. This was performed instrumentally and through emotional and affective narratives that told stories of attachment to space, stories which revealed latent realities about migration and belonging. These stories were expressed through immersion in a virtual visual reality, which was both current, real and envisioned, as they evoked “the shared practices of a group, community, or society through which meanings are made out of the visual, aural, and textual world of representations (Sturken and Cartwright 2009: 3).

While not always able to overcome anxieties about disrepair and displacement, participants engaged with the immersive digital space to offer personal modes of engagement, enacting micro-processes of recognition through architectural and social space, which would later further animate wider advocacy and relational networks. By offering these insights, the paper contributes to an investigation of architecture and belonging through space. It argues that diverse modalities of civic rights and urban citizenship offer crucial insights about the ecologies of urban planning particularly in relation to the hybrid realms of affect they produce, which extend the scale of interactions beyond the purely local spheres of urban activism.

The paper also makes a case for a methodological innovation in the field of action research and digital co-production: by enabling participants to repurpose existing media assets and knowledge resources beyond mainstream expectations and formalized conventions of urban planning, it casts a new light on accounts of urban citizens stories of belonging and of rights’ claims through the city. I have argued that these insights about ordinary concerns of struggle for visibility and symbolic (as well as actual) recognition may emerge when we engage with others to enact tangible place-ness.

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Notes

1. The author was the lead researcher in the REDACTED FOR ANONYMITY
2. ‘Asset mapping’ is grounded on asset-based community capacity development frameworks (ABCD), which rely on the premise that specific groups maybe better

equipped to achieve their objectives, if they identify (map) and mobilise resources (assets) which may be hidden or under-recognized (see Alexiou et al, 2016; Alevizou et al., 2016; Mathie and Cunningham, 2002). Building on from ABCD frameworks, media sociologists and urban informatics researchers have further explored communicative and behavioural dimensions to reveal that a) communication assets/infrastructures can be both physical and digital components of the urban environment (e.g. Ball-Rokeach and Kim, 2013; Foth et al., 2011); and/or b) and relational or networked assets that refer to ties with like-minded individuals, groups and organizations, sharing connections, goals or norms/values (see Graham-Gibson, 2006; Chen et al, 2012).

3. Wards Corner Community Plan Blog: Design and Access Statement /Planning Application: <https://wardscornercommunityplan.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/d-a-s-rev-a-wcc-2013-10-07.pdf> (accessed 20 December 2018)

4. *StickyWorld* (renamed *Confer* in 2018) is a multi-stakeholder engagement digital start up. It presents users with a possibility to build spatial projects using 360 VR photography, plans and conversational layers. Existing images from parts of the WCC plan were rendered to produce a panoramic tour to partial aspects of the plan and to enable a virtual reality experience with commentary and public consultation. For full access to the archive see

<https://cc.confers.com/room/presentation?roomid=11#page/slides>
(accessed 20 November 2019).

4. A recognition of the significance of speech acts and speech act theory, as it was devised by Austin (1962), is widespread today beyond the fields of semantics and socio-linguistics. Austin's theories have inspired a long line of original thinking ranging from political philosophy to communications; here I have adapted notions of connecting rights acts that go beyond visioning and commenting in digital environments in relation to inform aspects of both urban and digital citizenship (cf. Isin and Everett (2015), for a longer discussion of these topics).

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