

Architect	<a href="#">Minoru Yamasaki</a>
Location	New York, New York
Date	1970 to 1977. Demolished by terrorist attack on September 11, 2001 <a href="#">timeline</a>
Notes	<hr/> <p>Please see our main <a href="#">World Trade Center</a> and <a href="#">World Trade Center - More Images</a> pages for building information, commentary, references, details, photos, and drawings. This is an additional article page for the World Trade Center, telling a little-known story of the planning and politics behind the original WTC, from the perspective of one of the planning professionals participating in the process.</p> <hr/>
Images	<a href="#">GreatBuildings Images</a> <a href="#">Google Images</a>
Discussion	<p><b>World Trade Center - History Commentary</b></p> <p><b>Casting Giant Shadows: The Politics of Building the World Trade Center</b></p> <p>by Roger Cohen</p> <p><i>Originally published in the Winter 1990/1991 issue of Portfolio: A Quarterly Review of Trade and Transportation, and reprinted here by permission of the author, this article by a New York planning insider tells the background story of the towering politics, planning, and power plays behind the World Trade Center project. — Editor</i></p> <p>Those who knew Austin Tobin, the high-powered Executive Director of the Port of New York Authority, frequently described him as polite, courtly, and even shy. But Tobin's quiet demeanor never limited his relentless advocacy on behalf of the agency he led for 30 momentous years. And despite the measured shyness, Tobin was a vigorous public speaker who traveled the country and scoured the metropolitan New York-New Jersey region for opportunities to explain and extol his beloved Port Authority and its program.</p> <p>Often, whether addressing suburban luncheons or national conventions, Tobin would invoke the words of <a href="#">Daniel H. Burnham</a>, the turn-of-the-century Chicago architect who built New York's first great skyscraper, the Flatiron Building. "Make no small plans," Tobin quoted Burnham. "For they have no power to stir the blood."</p> <p>Of all the great public works Tobin undertook, of all the big plans he and his loyal staff devised, clearly none was so big as the development of the <a href="#">World Trade Center</a>. Surely none stirred the blood in so many ways for so long a time; even today, the Twin Towers remain as controversial as they are tall. When the final design plans for the Trade Center were unveiled at a Saturday morning press conference at the New York Hilton in January, 1962, the next day's New York Times editorial presciently declared: "Their impact on New York, for better or for worse, economically and architecturally, is bound to be enormous."</p> <p>The impact has indeed been all that and more. First a financial white elephant, the complex has come to be immensely profitable and has delivered on its promise to help rejuvenate Lower Manhattan. As a global symbol of New York, the Twin Towers are as identifiable as the <a href="#">Eiffel Tower</a>, the <a href="#">Capitol</a> dome or <a href="#">Big Ben</a> are of their respective cities. But, as the project evolved, it also developed into a major factor in turning public attitudes against large-scale development, ambitious public works, and even against government action itself.</p> <p>The Trade Center project was widely denounced as a supreme example of self-glorifying monumentalism on the part of unaccountable, autonomous public authorities. Lingering resentment over its perceived excesses continues, two decades after its opening, to color public attitudes about the Port Authority.</p> <p>Without doubt the apotheosis of Tobin's eventful career, erecting the Trade Center, exacted a high personal cost on the Executive Director and an even higher institutional and political cost on the Port Authority to which he devoted his adult life. The repercussions have echoed like the residue of the Big Bang. Today, the port agency labors under a host of financially draining burdens and obligations it agreed to assume as the price for doing something entirely unprecedented: namely, a massive and fully tax-exempt public intervention in the private real estate market through the development of the world's largest office building.</p> <p>Of course, the World Trade Center story is by no means a Port Authority story exclusively. The port agency sat at the epicenter of a complex and often fragile web of state, local and federal authorities. And while Tobin's role in the project was pivotal, it was certainly no more so than that of two other gentlemen who were lifelong, world-class practitioners of Burnham's Law - the Brothers Rockefeller. It could be said that if the towers had been given names instead of numbers, Nelson and David would have been just about right.</p> <p><b>The Origins of the World Trade Center</b></p>

The seeds of the World Trade Center were first planted in the post-war 1940s. Flush with victory, the Americans prepared for a new surge of economic growth. It was evident that the reconstruction of Europe would entail a huge increase in transatlantic trade. To capture these opportunities, the New York Legislature in 1946 created a World Trade Corporation to explore the possibilities for a trade center in Manhattan.

The project got as far as conceptual drawings that envisioned a \$140 million complex of 21 buildings covering about 10 blocks. The chief purpose of the 5 million square feet would not be offices, however, but exhibition space. The idea was dropped when the planners determined that fully 80 percent of the nation's 6,000 largest companies would be required to sign on as tenants in order to make the center financially viable.

The World Trade Corporation instead recommended that the city concentrate on redeveloping and modernizing its waterfront. (Shortly thereafter, City Hall would rebuff the Port Authority's bid to control the renewal of the New York waterfront, causing the authority to successfully focus instead on developing a vast container complex at Port Newark.) The Trade Center idea disappeared for over a decade, but it never died. During that decade, New York grew vigorously and strengthened its leadership as North America's economic capital. But most of that growth was in midtown. Lower Manhattan was increasingly bypassed as a location to erect new buildings or set up new business. By the late 1950s, only one-fifth of the new commercial construction in New York was going up south of City Hall.

One exception was the 60-story headquarters of the [Chase Manhattan Bank](#). Chase's president, David Rockefeller, seeing the bank's massive investment at risk from the continuing relative decline of the district's real estate values, proposed the formation of a new business organization, the Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association (DLMA). Along with the chief executives of Morgan Guaranty Trust, AT&T, Guardian Life Insurance and other captains of finance, Rockefeller and the DLMA set out to find a strategy for restoring downtown's former luster.

In 1958, the association retained one of the nation's premier architectural partnerships, [Skidmore, Owings & Merrill](#) (SOM) to develop a plan for "a new Lower Manhattan." SOM proposed a wholesale rebuilding and expansion of the financial district: the narrow streets would be closed, others widened, traffic redistributed and over 100 blocks razed. Various features of the SOM plan were implemented in some form or other - a Civic Center east of City Hall, a large marina on the East River that presaged the South Street Seaport, a modern East River heliport. It also suggested a World Trade Center.

Rockefeller sent the report on to Mayor Robert F. Wagner, and called SOM right back. He was intrigued by the trade center idea and wanted to know more. By January of 1960, DLMA had in hand a proposal for a \$250 million trade center to be erected on a 13-acre site at the east end of Wall Street. It was to include a 70-story office-hotel building, an international trade mart for the exhibition of goods, a securities exchange building, a retail arcade, and large plaza, all built upon a two-story platform that would supersede and displace the conventional street grid. The trade center plan had many of the features of other multi-building complexes that the Rockefellers had a hand in developing: the United Nations, Lincoln Center, and above all, midtown's architectural jewel, Rockefeller Center.

David Rockefeller sent the DLMA report to Wagner, to his brother Nelson, New York's governor, and, significantly, to New Jersey Governor Robert Meyner. DLMA proposed that the Port Authority should study the project. Port Authority staff had worked with DLMA and their architects on the initial plan. More importantly, said Rockefeller, the Port Authority enjoyed three significant advantages needed to "activate" the proposal: the power of eminent domain; sufficiently large credit capacity; and the proven professional expertise and experience to realize the ambitious plan.

### **The PATH to the World Trade Center**

The Port Authority was delighted to take up Rockefeller's suggestion that they study the SOM plans for a World Trade Center on the East River. To do the study, they convened an architects' panel consisting of three of America's most prominent practitioners, [Gordon Bunshaft](#) of SOM, [Wallace K. Harrison](#), the Rockefeller "family architect," and [Edward Durrell Stone](#). Coordinating the study was ~ former Port Authority architect and planner, Richard Adler.

In March of 1961, the agency issued a proposal for a \$335-million project of 11 million square feet that would include a 72-story world trade mart, with a hotel, a world trade institute and exhibition facility, a 30-story world commerce exchange to house government offices and agencies, a 20-story trade center gateway building housing international banking, law and other business services, and a securities exchange building - in the shape of a tapered barrel - that would house the stock and commodity markets.

The Port Authority report said the trade center would "stimulate the flow of commerce through the Port, would be economically feasible, and, due to its unique problems of financing, organization and operation... could only be undertaken by a public agency." The agency promised that by consolidating world trade business functions at a single location, "the improvements in efficiency would bring savings in time and money, which would in turn attract greater cargo tonnage." Equally important, the trade center "would provide an appropriate symbol of the Port's pre-eminence."

The Port Authority proposal was very well received. Even in Trenton, Governor Meyner said he thought the plan was "dynamic, forward-thinking [and] sound." The New Jersey governor, however, had other concerns atop his agenda. The state's commuter railroads were tottering perilously close to all-out collapse. Some, like the Hudson Tubes, sputtered along under bankruptcy protection for some time.

Despite the explosion of post-war home-ownership in suburbia and corresponding growth in commutation, trans-Hudson crossings by train and rail-owned ferry had declined by 60 million a year in the decade following the war's end. By the late 1950s, ridership losses were hemorrhaging at a rate of almost 15 percent a year. Most commuters much preferred the convenience and comfort of crossing by car using the Port Authority's bridges and tunnels or by bus to the modern Eighth Avenue bus terminal over that of the dirty, unreliable train services.

To its critics, the Port Authority's auto and bus facilities were directly responsible for the commuter rail system's precipitous decline. A rising chorus in both states was demanding the Port Authority come up with solutions to problems they laid at the agency's doorstep. To the Port Authority, which operates on a wholly self-sufficient financial basis, the numbers made a compelling case to avoid the rail transit business. Commuter rail could never be anything but a deficit operation, Tobin argued stubbornly, and therefore could not be considered by the Port Authority without placing the agency's creditworthiness in grave peril.

Meyner, however, was intent on saving the state's rail system, and his transportation chief, Highway Commissioner Dwight Palmer, developed a creative plan to do so. Under Palmer's plan, the duplicative services of several ailing railroads would be consolidated and state capital utilized to connect the systems together into a seamless network. Also, the rail lines would be allowed to abandon their biggest money-losers, including their aged, maintenance-intensive ferry fleets and waterfront terminals. But to eliminate ferries, Palmer recognized the need for a commuter alternative across the Hudson.

He saw it in the Hudson Tubes, operated by the bankrupt Hudson & Manhattan Railroad. Palmer proposed the Port Authority acquire the faintly breathing H&M, modernize, expand and run the Tubes. Under increasing pressure and attack for his hands-off-rail-transit posture, Tobin determined that the Palmer plan for an H&M takeover might be possible - on the condition that the Port Authority receive a "statutory fence" guaranteeing that the Tubes would be the limit to the Port Authority's financial involvement in deficit rail operations. The agency said it could afford no more than 10 percent of its general reserves, or about \$6 million a year, to cover commuter rail deficits.

In Albany, Nelson Rockefeller thought he saw in the Palmer plan a major advantage to exploit. Within ten days of the issuance of the Port Authority's World Trade Center report, the New York governor introduced authorizing legislation to allow the Port Authority to undertake the two projects - the trade center and the H&M takeover - in tandem. Alarmed, Tobin reported to his commissioners that "the purpose of this packaging is to compel New Jersey" to approve the trade center as the political price for the takeover of the Tubes.

S. Sloan Colt, a prominent New York banker who was Chairman of the Port Authority's gubernatorially appointed Board of Commissioners, warned Rockefeller that his strategy "will court defeat" in the Garden State. Vice-Chairman James C. Kellogg III, a New Jerseyman, was more direct. In a telegram to Rockefeller, Kellogg said the six Port Authority commissioners from New Jersey were aggressively selling the trade center concept across the river and were meeting with success. But the Rockefeller legislative strategy, Kellogg warned, "would be certain to defeat the World Trade Center in New Jersey."

Unmoved, Rockefeller secured swift legislative approval of his package deal, but Kellogg's view prevailed. Meyner demanded the two projects be considered separately, arguing that the trade center benefited New York alone, while both states received advantage by the takeover of the Tubes. Moreover, the projects were hardly comparable with the trade center estimated at \$355 million and the H&M buyout and modernization just \$70 million. To this, Rockefeller responded that the crucial difference was that the trade center would be financially self-supporting, while the Tubes promised endless deficits.

The argument settled into a chilly stalemate until November, 1961, when New Jersey elected a new governor, Richard J. Hughes. Before his inauguration the following January, Hughes initiated a series of meetings with Rockefeller at the latter's midtown offices to discuss commuter taxes and transportation issues. At the same time, the Port Authority continued its planning of the H&M takeover. Part of the transaction involved the acquisition of the H&M's two large office towers above its lower Manhattan terminal on Church Street. It turned out that these Hudson Terminal Buildings were in such bad shape that Tobin said he "began to question the wisdom of putting some \$9 million of improvements" in and proposed instead to demolish them and sell or lease the air rights. "We began to consider who might possibly be interested in developing these air rights," Tobin noted, when Richard Sullivan, the director of port development, and his assistant Sidney Schachter suggested relocating the proposed trade center to the west side site above the H&M.

Sullivan and Schachter presented the idea to Tobin on Friday, December 8. One week later, a special planning group, working round the clock in a suite of the George Washington Hotel near Gramercy Park, presented the results of their crash planning program. Several advantages were identified: the new site had far superior subway connections than the East River location, and the Tubes itself represented still another transit link connecting the trade center to New Jersey; the two locations were equidistant from the corner of Broadway and Wall Street, but the H&M site would constitute a major expansion of the financial district westward across Broadway.

Asked why the two projects hadn't been coupled originally, Tobin said: "Our thinking throughout has been that both projects were necessary to the Port, and they should be considered as separate projects of benefit to both states and not as a political package." He conceded, however, that this new concept offered "obvious political attractions."

Later that same afternoon of December 15, Governor-elect Hughes dropped by Tobin's office with his close political adviser (and former Port Authority commissioner) Thorn Lord for an informal visit. With Colt and Kellogg listening in, Hughes revealed to Tobin "his strong sense of frustration and disappointment that he could see no way to break the existing deadlock on the H&M-World Trade Center issue. He expressed the hope that somehow the World Trade Center could be made more palatable to New Jersey. This point

of view fit in so perfectly with our new concept that I finally decided to mention the fact that our staff had been giving very preliminary study to the possibility of merging the two projects."

According to Tobin, "Governor-elect Hughes immediately became most interested in this idea and by the possibility he saw of solving the H&M problem. His reaction was very definitely that the proposal might be acceptable to New Jersey [and] said he would discuss the matter with Governor Rockefeller at a scheduled meeting with him the following week."

Hughes wasted no time garnering support among Trenton legislators, and called Tobin to inform him of the "excellent reactions" the new idea had drawn. The next Tuesday, Chairman Colt phoned Rockefeller requesting an immediate meeting "of the utmost importance" concerning new developments in the trade center and H&M projects. Two days later, Tobin and Colt flew to Albany to brief Rockefeller and his executive secretary, William Ronan. The governor, said Tobin, was "immediately enthusiastic."

Swiftly, Tobin sought to enlist the support of other crucial actors. David Rockefeller said he was agreeable as long as three conditions were met: that the trade center be in Lower Manhattan, that it be built by the Port Authority and that its construction begin as soon as possible. On Friday, December 22, the day Hughes and Rockefeller were scheduled to meet, Tobin called Mayor Wagner, but spoke instead to the city Planning Commission Chairman James Felt, who tentatively endorsed the plan. That afternoon, Hughes sent word to Tobin that the story was about to break in the Newark Evening News, forcing Tobin to hurriedly issue a press release announcing that the Port Authority would "undertake a study of the possibility of developing a World Trade Center and of combining this facility with a new modern terminal for the Hudson & Manhattan Railroad."

That evening, Hughes and Rockefeller had what Tobin described as "a profitable meeting," at which they agreed to have their staffs begin work on the necessary authorizing legislation. The Newark Evening News, the state's dominant paper and a frequent critic of what it perceived as the Port Authority's habitual tilt toward New York over New Jersey's interests, wrote glowingly of the new developments: "There is every indication that the trade center project may now open a new era of friendliness in the relations between the two states."

Tobin, in his weekly report to the Commissioners, noted with a touch of understatement: "Thus ended what had been an extremely interesting and busy week in which, to the great satisfaction of all of us, both the H&M and the World Trade Center projects rose from the ashes of the 1961 legislative sessions of both states." Over-optimistically he concluded, "There is a real possibility that we will have acquired the H&M and begun the development of the World Trade Center before the middle of 1962."

### **Battles Small and Large**

Lawyers for the Port Authority and the states set about crafting legislation to authorize the project. Among the provisions was the creation of a new Port Authority subsidiary, the Port Authority Trans-Hudson Corporation, to acquire and operate the Hudson Tubes. This new entity, PATH, was needed to eliminate the risk that the federal Interstate Commerce Commission might assert jurisdiction not only over the Tubes, but over all Port Authority "transactions and accounts."

The PATH plans included Port Authority commitments to develop a new bus terminal and office tower above the H&M station at Journal Square in downtown Jersey City, and major new transfer stations in Harrison and the meadowlands of Secaucus to connect PATH to the commuter rail lines.

On February 13, 1962, less than a month after Hughes took the oath as governor, both houses of the New Jersey Legislature unanimously passed the Hudson Tubes-World Trade Center bill, which the new governor signed at 6:30 p.m. On March 7, the same bill passed the New York Senate, 40-8, and the Assembly 99-28. Three weeks later, with Ronan, Colt and Tobin standing by, Rockefeller signed it into law.

Had the urbane and powerful men of New York and Albany believed that, with New Jersey's assent, the way was now unimpeded for development of the now authorized Trade Center, they were naive in their optimism. Opposition and problems did not disappear, they simply relocated. City Hall, and later a succession of business interests, alternated as spearheads in fighting the Trade Center.

Mayor Wagner was first. He called Tobin the Saturday after the Newark News story broke to state "his very strong displeasure" at having not been included in deliberations on relocating the project. Weeks later, the mayor complained again to Tobin that he was being treated "as an outsider rather than a central figure" in the planning discussions.

Nonetheless, the mayor was unquestionably a principal, if only for the fact that city approval was required to vacate the public streets of the 13-block site. Wagner raised substantive issues, as well. He insisted the New York Stock Exchange be excluded from the plans out of concern that its relocation would sorely depress the rental market in the central spine of the financial district. He also had questions about the Port Authority's intentions to make payments to the city in lieu of taxes, whether the bistate agency would adhere to municipal condemnation procedures, and who would control federal urban renewal funds that might come along to redevelop the adjacent Washington Street Market to the north. At one point, Tobin offered either to turn the entire project over to the city if Wagner could assure both governors it would be promptly built, or enter into a joint venture in which the city and Port Authority split the capital costs. On both suggestions, the mayor begged off. However, on each substantive issue the city raised Tobin yielded to Wagner's satisfaction, explaining that the alternative might have been months and possibly years of "dreary bargaining, recrimination and counter-charges."

Of the business opposition, the most visible was a group called the Downtown West Businessmen's Association, representing the retail

merchants, many of them small electronics dealers, who were threatened with relocation by the construction. A second group, representing financial district landlords, concerned themselves with the depressing influence on the neighborhood real estate market the colossal project could have. Thus began a series of court challenges to the Trade Center that resulted in decisions for and against the Port Authority until the New York Court of Appeals finally upheld the agency and the U.S. Supreme Court refused in December 1963 to review the matter further.

During this same period, the Port Authority sought major tenants to anchor the complex. With Wagner now supportive, discussion could be opened with the Kennedy administration to relocate the U.S. Customs Bureau into a new 800,000 square foot Customs House. In his public pronouncements, Tobin never missed a chance to link the Trade Center to John Kennedy's trade liberalization and tariff reduction policies. The breakthrough, however, came from Albany in January, 1964, when Rockefeller announced a consolidation of state offices in New York City into 1.9 million square feet of space in the Trade Center.

### **The Tallest**

Five days after securing the state's commitment, the Port Authority revealed its plans for a \$525 million, 10 million square foot project consisting of two 110-story towers that would be the tallest buildings on earth.

Accounts differ on when the Port Authority determined to surpass the Empire State Building as the world's tallest. Tobin's reports to the commissioners on the Trade Center project are oddly silent on the subject. Architectural historian Anthony Robins claims that the idea initially came from the Port Authority's public relations staff and was embraced by the Trade Center development team as a dramatic marketing tool to attract tenants. The architect, Seattle-born Minoru Yamasaki, always shrugged off the world's tallest title as inconsequential, correctly predicting that it would soon be surpassed.

But crowning a new king of the Manhattan skyline was among the most controversial elements of the entire project. Lawrence Wien, a principal owner of the Empire State Building, immediately joined the Trade Center's most vocal opponents. Wien's Committee for a Reasonable World Trade Center especially galled Tobin, who noted that the Fifth Avenue landmark was originally built by a group whose principals had included Al Smith, the ex-governor and spiritual father of the Port Authority. "I am sure it never occurred to those progressive Americans that the height of their building would forever limit the height of future construction in New York City, any more than it ever would have occurred to them that the Woolworth Building had placed limits on their own plans," Tobin said in a 1966 speech at the Roosevelt Hotel. "Al Smith would have been waving his brown derby to hail New York's great trade center - and yes, waving it from the observatory of his own Empire State Building. But then, Al Smith was a broad gauge, unselfish, forward-looking New Yorker."

Wien and others pressed on, nonetheless, and in early 1966 they found another ally in the newly elected mayor, John V. Lindsay. Lindsay felt the Port Authority, rather than build office towers, should do more to restore the city to its former glory as the focal point of the harbor. He directed the Planning Commission to prepare a new study on the effects of the trade center project. Soon the City Council got into the fray, launching public hearings, followed by hearings conducted by the Board of Estimate. Among the new issues to emerge was the possibility that television transmissions from atop the Empire State Building would be seriously disrupted.

Eventually, compromises were worked out: to allow the broadcasters to relocate their transmitters atop the Trade Center at no cost to them for the balance of their long-term lease with the Empire State Building; increases in the in-lieu-of-tax payments to the city; and a Port Authority commitment to invest more than \$100 million in a new luxury passenger ship terminal on the Hudson, and a major new container terminal at Red Hook, Brooklyn.

On March 25, 1966, four years after the enactment of the authorizing legislation, demolition finally began on 26 vacant buildings on the World Trade Center site. But opposition and controversy were far from over. By 1970, New Jersey had a new governor, William Cahill, whose campaign against his Democratic opponent, former governor Robert Meyner, focused its heaviest attacks against the Port Authority and the inadequacy of the agency's contribution to mass transit.

A second critical source of opposition to Tobin came from Rockefeller's top transportation advisor, William Ronan. Having devised the plan for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority which enabled Rockefeller finally to bring Robert Moses to heel, Ronan was named head of the MTA and, in 1967, a Port Authority commissioner. Pressing for more transit assistance, Ronan represented the first major disagreement with Tobin's leadership from within the Port Authority board.

Cahill and Ronan demanded a deeper Port Authority commitment to transit projects, only to come up against the barrier of Tobin's "statutory fence" limiting the agency's deficit operations to that of PATH. Infuriated, Cahill vetoed plans for a hotel at the Trade Center, delaying that project until after he left office in 1974. In 1973, the states rescinded the 1962 deficit limitation, authorizing the Port Authority to extend PATH from Newark to Plainfield, and to begin to develop a rail transit link between Manhattan and Kennedy International Airport in southeastern Queens.

But Tobin's fence proved impregnable when a bondholder's suit was brought and the U.S. Supreme Court found that the deficit limitation was an inviolate covenant between the Port Authority and its bondholders. In response, the political leadership of both states stated publicly their determination never to let the Port Authority go its own way again.

The growing ill will and criticism ultimately left Tobin embittered and alienated from the Port Authority's previously loyal and supportive Board of Commissioners - so much so that in December of 1971, Tobin abruptly announced his resignation after 45 years of Port Authority service, and 15 months later he even declined to attend the formal dedication ceremonies of Trade Center he did so

much to build.

On December 16, 1970, the first tenants occupied the lower floors of the Trade Center's North Tower. On a rainy Wednesday, April 4, 1973, the complex was finally dedicated before 4,000 people, principally Port Authority employees and construction workers, who heard Cahill extol the completion of the complex as "a great day in a great city," while noting pointedly, "but it's not New Jersey." Rockefeller, citing the legions who made the buildings possible, added that "at the head of the list has got to be Austin Tobin."

The mention of Tobin's name drew some of the loudest cheers of the day. Though Tobin had been gone from the Port Authority for more than year, and though he never got the opportunity to occupy the great buildings he had created, it was evident to those in attendance who was the hero of the World Trade Center project. But in his absence that day there was something of a hint of the tragedy that tinged the heroism. Certainly, though, there could be no dispute that Austin Tobin's World Trade Center would retain the "power to stir the blood."

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