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Abstract

Waikiki, Hawaii, faces declining tourism numbers, sinking property values, and possibly a destination entering the decline phase of the tourism life cycle. Seeking the advice of world renowned planners, it has set its sights on a new master plan aimed at correcting much that seems to have gone wrong

Keywords

Waikiki, hospitality

Waikiki Faces Major Problems: Does New Master Plan Hold Solutions?

by
Robert A. Meyer

Waikiki, Hawaii, faces declining tourism numbers, sinking property values, and possibly a destination entering the decline phase of the tourism life cycle. Seeking the advice of world renowned planners, it has set its sights on a new master plan aimed at correcting much that seems to have gone wrong.

Waikiki has matured as a destination, and tourism arrival numbers are faltering. The steady tourism growth curve that inched up each year over the past decade came to a sudden stop in 1991. The place where once hotels ran at near capacity year round today sees continued occupancy slumps, deep discounting, and labor layoffs. Tax revenues have fallen. Political leaders have changed. Japanese investors are selling the hotels they purchased only a few years ago, taking hefty losses. "Six hotels valued at a total of \$1.1 billion during the late '80s have sold for a combined price tag of \$185 million in the past couple of years, a drop of 86 percent."¹ Many are worried about the future of the area, since Waikiki remains a key element in the tourism industry in Hawaii. A quick look at the statistics illustrates why there is concern. Waikiki generates 45 percent of the state's total visitor expenditures, and 60 percent of the state's hotel room taxes. Of the six million plus visitors who come to the island of Oahu, where Waikiki is located, over four million go only to Waikiki.²

Much discussion has centered on Waikiki in relation to the product life cycle. The Hawaii Visitors Bureau, business leaders, and politicians repeatedly refer to Waikiki as a "matured" destination. Research suggests that a destination such as Waikiki may be at a point defined as stagnation where peak numbers have been reached and the destination is no longer fashionable.³ If it is assumed that Waikiki is at this stage of stagnation, there is a belief among several authors that a tourism area can in fact be rejuvenated.⁴ Certain authors suggest that area life cycle extensions may postpone a decline phase.⁵ The recent

planning in Waikiki falls under the topic of area rejuvenation;⁶ the proposed scope undoubtedly would be the first such undertaking in a major destination falling into the stagnation definition. Research by Stansfield focused on the life cycle of Atlantic City and how the implementation of gambling rejuvenated the resort area. Current plans for Waikiki encompass both the infrastructure and superstructure of the resort area.⁷ The 1992 City and County of Honolulu Master Plan is a comprehensive redevelopment plan, a case study of the complexities involved in identifying problems, defining solutions, and meeting the challenges of implementation.

State Convenes Task Force

In recent years there has been much talk of a redevelopment plan for Waikiki, but the early 1990s brought a more organized approach to the efforts. In April 1990, the Department of General Planning convened the Waikiki Task Force whose mission was to gain input from various constituencies on ideas for Waikiki redevelopment. This group held a series of 10 public hearings for virtually all Waikiki organizations, neighborhood boards, and public interest groups. In September 1990, the mayor of the city and county of Honolulu formed an advisory committee for the purpose of developing a new Waikiki master plan. The boldest move, however, came from a private foundation, the Queen Emma Foundation, a major land owner in Waikiki, with the financial resources to fund a high profile and elaborate planning undertaking. In January 1991, many of the key civic leaders were brought together by the Queen Emma Foundation under the title of the Vision of Waikiki 2020 Committee. Their mission included three critical elements:

- submission of Waikiki master plan concepts to city officials and, as appropriate, the incorporation of specific proposals into a long-range, visionary master plan for Waikiki
- identification and realization of an effective implementation program which would provide government with a workable mechanism to achieve the various aspects of the plan under a high priority, Waikiki-focused approach
- implementation of an ongoing program for the continual and proper operation and maintenance of improvements recommended for Waikiki under the plan.⁸

The first challenge that faced Vision 2020 was to objectively identify the major problems that faced Waikiki in the present and in the future. There was plenty of criticism in the local community, but it was often blurred by politics and vested interest groups. The decision was made early by the Vision 2020 Committee to seek analysis from experts that were both independent and world class urban planners. In an attempt to find the best ideas and solutions, not one firm was selected but five. Each was asked to work independently within the

three broadly-stated goals. At the same time, the Vision 2020 Committee assembled local experts in tourism, traffic finance, environmental quality, construction, and hotel and commercial development to function as sources of local information for the planning teams. The teams selected were all American Institute of Architects award winners for urban planning that spanned the globe with projects from Disney World to the master plan for the Island of Rhodes, Greece. These firms, considered by many to be the best that money could buy, were ESL Elbasane & Logan Architects of Berkeley; Goody, Clancy & Associates of Boston; International Tourism and Resort Advisors of San Francisco; Johnson, Johnson, & Roy, Inc. of Dallas, Ann Arbor and Chicago; Robert Lamb Hart Planners & Architects of New York and San Francisco.⁹

Vision 2020 assembled another group of experts to serve as a review panel for the planning teams. This group, consisting of world class experts in tourism development, included Wing Chao, senior vice-president of Disney Development Company; Raymond Watson, developer of the town of Irving and chairman of the board of the Walt Disney Company; and Nicholas Winslow, whose consulting firm has completed studies for Universal Studios. The other distinguished panel members came from transportation fields, urban development boards, and world renowned consulting firms in tourism development.¹⁰

The approach and the scope of this planning process was unique. Five internationally renowned planning teams, a bank of local experts as resource individuals for the planning teams, and a world class independent review panel to continually challenge the teams to be creative yet practical provided a model to both identify the major problems and find possible solutions from a vast array of experts. By the end of 1991, five separate plans emerged for the redevelopment of Waikiki; there emerged many themes reflecting common challenges and goals independently identified by all teams. These themes were refined into summaries and shared with the city government. Much of the finalized work was incorporated into a 1992 City Master Plan for Waikiki.¹¹

Several Areas of Concern Emerged

In the final analysis, there emerged several major areas of concern from the five planning teams. Each tended to focus on selected issues; however, 11 major points were common to all as follows:

- Waikiki has become an “urban resort” and was often compared to Miami, Florida, by the planning team. Typical problems associated with urban resorts included high rise buildings which have not only cut off views of the ocean, but created the perception of a congested area.
- The major beach areas have become severely eroded and crowded. In many areas, the beach has become narrow and walkways along the beach itself are difficult to find.

- Waikiki lacks clearly defined residential and resort neighborhoods; the result is that the “resort atmosphere” is difficult to identify.
- Waikiki lacks accessible open space. The only two areas currently identified were the International Marketplace, in the heart of Waikiki, which itself has become congested, and Ft. DeRussy, which is federal land.
- The quality of the pedestrian environment is poor in many parts of Waikiki. This includes narrow streets, poor landscaping, and blank walls, which are often parking structures.
- The transportation system in Waikiki is difficult. Waikiki is difficult to get to; the transit routes are confusing to tourists, and the bus staging areas are inadequate.
- Current residents are being displaced from Waikiki because of increased rents and purchase prices. This in effect is isolating Waikiki from the urban environment, which was believed to be an asset to the resort mix.
- The Ala Wai Canal, which bounds the majority of Waikiki, has become polluted. Critical green areas on the other side of the canal are inaccessible and under-utilized.
- The management of Waikiki is poorly coordinated and under-funded.
- Waikiki is losing its sense of place as it relates to the Hawaiian history and culture.
- The lack of a convention center hinders Waikiki in competing as a full-service destination.¹²

Other related issues arose. Some of the major concerns were in the areas of destination marketing, labor issues, law enforcement, and foreign investment. The 1992 City Master Plan adopted many ideas from the planning teams of Vision 2020 and established goals to address several of the 11 major issues.

Land Use in Waikiki

One of the more complex issues raised by the planning teams was the issue of land use in Waikiki. This certainly is not a new topic in the city’s history. Over the decades, this topic has continually been examined. A landmark decision for Waikiki was reached in 1976, when the Waikiki Special Design District Ordinance was passed by the City and County of Honolulu in 1974 and implemented in 1976. This historic ordinance sought “to institute quality control on Waikiki.”¹³ This bill sought to control the over-development of the late 1960s and early 1970s by placing restrictions on the development of hotels and apartments. In addition, the ordinance focused on several other key areas to encourage developments that would improve and complement public facilities, utilities, and visual aspects of the urban environment, to ensure that future developments would alleviate traffic and utility problems, and to make provisions for utilities and off-site improvements in advance of the developments.¹⁴

The WSD ordinance did slow the growth of Waikiki, but some to major projects continued. During the 1980s, there were some infrastructure improvements, and several additional studies were completed on Waikiki. By the end of the 1980s, five policies were defined by the general plan:

- to provide for the long-term viability of Waikiki as Oahu's primary resort area by giving the area priority in visitor industry related public expenditures
- to provide for a high quality and safe environment for visitors and residents in Waikiki
- to encourage private participation in improvements to facilities in Waikiki
- to prohibit major increases in permitted development densities in Waikiki
- to prohibit further growth in the permitted number of hotel and resort condominium units in Waikiki.¹⁵

Plan Divides Waikiki into Two Regions

The five planning teams of Vision 2020 basically adopted these recommendations in spirit and further adopted a recommendation advanced in the late 1980s to divide Waikiki into two major sections. Central to this recommendation is the belief that Waikiki needs to clearly designate residential and resort areas. The two blocks parallel and adjacent to the beach would be the resort district, and the two blocks parallel and adjacent to the Ala Wai Canal would become the residential district. The idea seems simple in theory; however, the realities of reaching this goal are far from easy.

The major obstacle is that much of this land is currently mixed use. To implement such a clear division would not only be costly, but in reality a long range effort. The 1992 City Master Plan analyzed Waikiki into areas that were "susceptible" to change, and those that were not. There is some belief that certain areas that do not conform to this desired residential/resort designation can be changed in the short term. These represent parcels of land within each area that could be changed into the "proper" use primarily based on the premise that the current landowners would be cooperative to the redevelopment concept. However, Waikiki has often not enjoyed receptive response to such proposed changes in the past, and there is nothing to indicate that these sentiments have changed. Cost is certainly one factor, but the political realities are quite possibly the larger reality.

In looking at additional solutions to land use issues, the planning teams offered many solutions that may hold more immediate promise than the residential/resort districts. One is the issue of "green" space. All of the planning teams focused on the large "green" areas that surround Waikiki. In many ways, Waikiki is an island onto itself. It is a narrow strip of land of approximately 618 acres, surrounded by the ocean on the one side, and bordered by the Ala Wai Canal on most of

the other side. Within this area, 30 percent is roads, 29 percent hotels, 18 percent apartments, 15 percent public, and 8 percent resort commercial.¹⁶

The land on the other side of the Ala Wai Canal, and the large parcels of land on the northern end of Waikiki, are for the most part city property currently used for a golf course, parks, the city zoo, and an elementary school. Planning teams labeled most of these areas as underutilized. The golf course currently is isolated from Waikiki by the Ala Wai Canal, with no bridges to directly connect the land. Many creative ideas were put forth by the planning teams to not only connect the golf course to Waikiki by pedestrian bridges, but to redesign the area itself to include more diversified recreational activities. This new area was defined as a new "great park." The areas at the northern end of Waikiki were also identified as green areas to redevelop. The school should be removed; the zoo should be expanded into a biological garden. The current parks should be redesigned with walkways to tie them more to Waikiki. All these ideas were aimed at reducing current artificial barriers that tend to isolate tourists from these green areas.

The 1992 City Master Plan did adopt most of these ideas, yet there are some real problems that will need to be addressed. Over the years there has been repeated discussion of placing pedestrian bridges over the Ala Wai Canal. These efforts have met with strong resistance from property owners who live in the areas adjacent to the golf course outside of Waikiki. They have argued that bridges over the Ala Wai Canal would bring tourists and related problems, such as crime and prostitution, into their neighborhoods. The golf course itself is the most heavily used municipal golf course in the United States; any proposed changes to the course would be carefully monitored by those who use it. There exists some sentiment that the elementary school is needed to serve the residents of Waikiki. Here, too, efforts to relocate the school are sure to be met with local resistance.

The city most likely will have the least amount of problems with upgrading the existing adjoining green park areas. Some of this land is already dedicated to an outdoor amphitheater and a general open air sports park, but most likely accessibility improvements will be generally welcomed. There have been numerous improvements to these areas in recent years, and when funding is available, most have met with little opposition.

Promenades Would Benefit Pedestrians

There were several additional ideas advanced by Vision 2020 and incorporated into the 1992 City Master Plan that relate to other land use issues. A key concept for the future proposes that a central promenade of sorts be created through the central part of Waikiki. It is proposed that several small city parks be connected by the closure of some side streets. These areas would then be converted into a well landscaped walkway which would contain sidewalk cafes and small retail establishments. This new walkway system includes the creation of a

“great pathway” or “promenade” through the middle of several blocks in Waikiki.

Expanding on such a promenade concept is a plan to create an overall promenade that would offer uninterrupted pedestrian access around the entire perimeter of Waikiki. This plan includes the widening of Waikiki beaches in several locations, a beachwalk with groves of palm trees well landscaped to become a part of the image and identity of Waikiki, and a series of piers on existing breakwaters to allow pedestrians to walk out over the ocean and look back at views of Waikiki. This beachwalk, as part of the promenade, would itself have unique paving and be located on the ocean side in front of the hotels. When connected to the Ala Wai promenade (to be presented later), this pedestrian path would allow one to walk, jog, or run around the perimeter of Waikiki. Included in this new pedestrian environment will be a comprehensive program of art and historical markers and places for people to sit, relax, and watch people, as part of the Waikiki experience.

These plans hope to create a new environment for the pedestrian. Since it is not possible to rid the resort of the many high-rise buildings and parking garages, the belief is that these promenade areas will create a new Waikiki resort ambiance. With hefty landscaping, special promenade paving, the piers, and the widening of the beach, it just might work. For the areas that have been identified as “susceptible to change” (which include several parcels in the existing Waikiki), there are plans to enhance and connect these parcels to the promenade areas. Some areas that could support additional buildings, have been identified, but these buildings would need to be developed in a manner that would further enhance this new resort ambiance. It should be noted that the idea of pedestrian promenades is not a new concept to city planners. As early as the 1960s, studies recommended that land be acquired for pedestrian promenades and ribbon parks. However, little was done to implement these recommendations.¹⁷

Ala Wai Canal Poses Challenge

The Ala Wai Canal is a historic challenge to Waikiki. Dredged in the 1920s, the canal was built to reclaim the swampland that today comprises much of Waikiki. The canal diverts runoff water from the mountains, which contains large amounts of silt and pollution materials from the residential areas between the mountains and Waikiki. The canal was designed to flow into the ocean at both ends; however, it was only three-fourths completed in the 1920s due to a shortage of funds. The canal is full of silt, and the water is brackish; it often develops a foul odor in the dry seasons, and has been declared unfit for swimming by the board of health. The canal has reached the point that it can no longer be ignored. It most certainly has gained the attention of political leaders, and presently there are pending appropriation measures to fund an improvement program. At this point in time, it is unclear how expansive the project will be; however, the master plan of 1992 offers some interesting ideas.

The 1992 Master Plan includes not only a dredging of the canal, but plans to drill wells to daily pump millions of gallons of water into the stagnating system. Test wells have already been drilled, and it has been determined that massive pumping is possible. Beyond these environmental improvements, the plans advocate a new canal walkway reminiscent of the Riverwalk in San Antonio, Texas. Envisioned is a waterway that is a well-landscaped promenade, which will be part of the promenade that is to encircle Waikiki. The new canal is to have a floating walkway that will be home to small cafes and pedestrian sitting areas. Special lighting will transform the walkway into a romantic evening adventure. There is a belief that with the water improvements will come additional water recreational activities. Currently, there is little more than canoe practice on the canal.

The project does hold some other challenges. The current city mayor wants the canal to be completed according to the 1920 plan, which would have it empty into the ocean at both ends. The 1992 Master Plan also advocates attention to the Ala Wai yacht harbor, which is located where the canal empties into the ocean. With aging piers, low rents, a cluttered repair facility, and the polluted canal water, the yacht harbor is not the picturesque gateway to Waikiki that planners envisioned. However, if improvements are made, low berth rents will disappear; this has already met with protests from current boat owners. Unclear, too, is how completing the canal at the other end will affect current beach areas, since it will empty into the middle of them. Will the additional pumped water clear out the pollution, or will it merely redistribute the pollution along Waikiki beach itself?

Convention Center Location Is Chosen

Hawaii business leaders have long advocated the construction of a convention center, but not until the economic downturn in 1991 was a general consensus reached. In the 1992 Master Plan, the convention center would be most ideally placed in the center of Waikiki, currently home to the International Marketplace. This was a natural location, since the land was available and it was central to the mass of hotel rooms. The idea met with fierce opposition by strong special interest groups. One issue was traffic and congestion concerns. After a lengthy public debate, a new site was chosen near the Ala Moana gateway, technically just outside Waikiki, on the second gateway to Waikiki, facing the Ala Wai Canal.

The convention center can serve to further illustrate the difficulties that Waikiki has faced in implementing improvement plans. The idea was advocated in the early 1970s. In the mid 1980s, a 5 percent hotel room tax was approved by the state legislature, with a portion of the tax earnings earmarked to pay for the facility. The proceeds ended up in the state's general fund and not in the building of a center as promised.

Other concerns plagued the construction of a center as well. Waikiki was already facing severe shortages in available land

resulting from high densities, congestion, traffic and inadequate infrastructure. Destinations abroad and on the U.S. mainland were competing for Waikiki's market. In addition, Hawaii faced other challenges — 'the high cost of airfare being foremost among them.' Some critics felt that a convention center would lead to 'permanent change in the lifestyle of all Hawaii.' Others saw Waikiki's residential character threatened, and questioned 'whether the developer's objective was primarily to be allowed to build offices, shops, a hotel and 800 luxury condominium units, with the convention center only an incidental and possibly unneeded trade-off for this profitable privilege.'¹⁸

The coincidental timing and integration of the 1992 master plan and the building of a convention center became entangled in the city's and state's battle over who would control the projects. The state supported legislation to place a Waikiki task force directly under the control of the state's Waikiki Convention Center Authority. However, strongly opposed to this move was the city's Office of Waikiki Development, a task force under the direction of the mayor and city managing director. The battle further delayed the project.¹⁹

After much debate, the convention center appears to be moving forward, to be completed by 1998. Many wonder if it has come too late and if it will indeed be able to compete in the new crowded convention center arena.

Transportation Has Improved

Over the years, there have been numerous improvements to the transportation situation in Waikiki. During the 1970s, many of Waikiki's streets were improved and widened. A system of one-way streets has helped to handle traffic more efficiently. The master plan of 1992 addresses certain on-going problems related to transportation. The planning teams of Vision 2020 suggested that Waikiki is at a saturation level for traffic and that current traffic levels be reduced slightly to make the city a quieter, more resort-like area, with less domination by vehicles. There is a proposal to establish parking areas outside Waikiki, with a shuttle service. There are also proposals to create pull-out areas for buses and a "circular bus" system which would connect localized points of interest. These proposals follow the recent defeat of a rapid transit system for the island which included links to Waikiki.

Residents Are Moving Out

With Waikiki heading the list of most expensive places to live in America, it has seen the gradual exodus of residents to places with lower rents and prices. The main concern here is that this continued exodus of residents will further deteriorate the "local" character of the area. The proposed solution is combining 157 acres in Waikiki from the present Resort Commercial Precincts and Resort Hotel Precincts into

a single Resort Mixed Use to encourage future development that will combine dwelling and commercial space. The 1992 Master Plan identifies several areas that can become Resort Mixed Use. The reality of this happening is debatable, especially with the current land ownership patterns and the historic high cost of real estate. There is some public land, the present site of an elementary school, which might hold promise for affordable housing. Much depends upon real estate prices. Market conditions may be the determining factors.

Hawaiian Culture Is Critical to Plans

There was a general consensus among the planning teams that Waikiki was losing, or had lost, its sense of place. As Waikiki has developed into an urban resort, it has lost its sense of Hawaiian identity. Newspaper articles continue to debate if the "aloha spirit" is alive or dead in Waikiki. The 1992 Master Plan addresses the need for future development projects to have a sense of Hawaiian culture and outlines goals to provide for the display of the art and history of Waikiki and Hawaii in open spaces, with Hawaiian themes incorporated into buildings.

Study after study over the years has warned that Waikiki was losing the basic culture that contributed to its success as a tourist destination. However, the warnings were not heeded:

Waikiki went the way of the latest trends, gradually transforming into a 'contemporary' urban resort. As time progressed from the 1960s through the 1980s, the architecture of Waikiki's hotels, as well as the many special interior showpieces (waterfalls, sculptures, fountains, etc.), adopted more of an individualistic 'look-at-me' appearance, rather than one of Hawaiian or even Polynesian design. ...Today throughout the resort, the 'new' stands next to the 'newer' which in turn stands side-by-side the 'newest,' revealing Waikiki's aging wrinkles. Waikiki's towering urban skyline rivals that of any major U.S. city. Due in part to its lack of mandating any sort of traditional unique appearance, architecturally, the resort struggles to define an image. Once again, a lack of planning has been the cause.²⁰

Recently the Queen Emma Foundation issued a report entitled, "Restoring Hawaiianess to Waikiki,"²¹ with 143 proposals. The author, George S. Kanahale, is a strong local advocate of implementing changes in Waikiki that will begin to restore the Hawaiian sense of place. There is some evidence of movement in this area. The Hawaii Hotel Association has established a committee to promote Hawaiian culture. The Waikiki Improvement Association, a non-profit organization of businesses dedicated to the betterment of Waikiki, now sponsors a twilight torch lighting and hula show at Kuhio Beach, adjacent to Waikiki Beach. The final design for the convention center incorporates Hawaiian themes throughout. Recently gas torches, a symbol of Hawaii, were added to Waikiki Beach Park. Several major hotel operators have begun

changing hotel uniforms to reflect a sense of Hawaiian dress. Yet the ultimate challenges still lie ahead as developers plan new commercial buildings for the future. Will the local government create the necessary power base to insist that newer buildings reflect a Hawaiian sense, or will it succumb to the ways of the old days? As yet, the city has done little to formulate legislation to ensure that private developers follow the goals of the 1992 Master Plan in this area.

Implementation: The Big Challenge

The 1992 Master Plan, reflecting many of the ideas of the Vision 2020 planning teams, faces many challenges, perhaps the biggest of which is the question of how to implement all or much of what has been proposed. In 1992, implementation was divided into three five-year phases. The first five major projects in phase one would be street and sidewalk improvements, Ala Wai Canal improvements, establishment of street cafes, Waikiki gateway beautification, and a people mover system. These steps would begin the development of the promenade areas that the 1992 Master Plan envisions surrounding Waikiki, and the "great walk" in the center of Waikiki. It also addresses the aging Ala Wai Canal and its many problems. It is estimated that this first phase will cost between \$60-70 million.²² Efforts to initialize phase one are currently underway.

Already attempts to implement these plans have had their challenges. Part of the on-going problem is the multi-layered control of Waikiki's numerous public services. Various state and city agencies share in the decision making and responsibility for many of the items where the 1992 Master Plan advocates changes. Since 1992, the Office of Waikiki Development was given various responsibilities, with the goal of coordinating efforts to implement the master plan. However, with the arrival of a new mayor last year, the office only recently made its appointments and began its difficult task. A successful track record is yet to be established. The new mayor has indicated he intends to move ahead with the "Waikiki face-lift," as he has coined it, but there is the question of finances. A large portion of the 1992 Master Plan falls under the domain of the city and county, and comes at a time when all these entities face shrinking revenues. There is hope that many of the larger changes would be financed by the private sector, yet with a real estate market on the skids in Waikiki, investors are not rushing forward with commitments. Finances are presenting major obstacles to phase one's implementation.

It does seem clear that Waikiki is at some stage of maturity or stagnation in the product life cycle. These recent efforts to develop a set of plans to begin to rejuvenate the destination will prove to be important. Leaders have sought the best ideas from those considered to be tops in the field of urban and resort planning. Several major problems and challenges have been identified, and bold solutions have been incorporated into the new master plan. If the 1992 Master Plan achieves its goals, it will physically change Waikiki.

The underlying belief is that these changes to Waikiki over the coming decades will prevent it from slipping into a "destination in decline." How Waikiki responds to the challenges it faces and the results in the coming years will provide additional insights into mature destinations. Hopefully the money, the resources, and the favorable politics will prevail. At this point in time, it is still unclear how these factors will play out over the next five years. However, we must be reminded that Waikiki has failed to follow sound planning advice in the past. Whatever happens in the years ahead, there certainly will be much to be learned from how Waikiki responds or fails to respond to its current serious challenges.

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