

IN THIS
FORM,
TOGETHER

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree Master of Fine Art in the Department of Furniture Design of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

Text by Elana Shvalbe © 2022

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SHVALBE

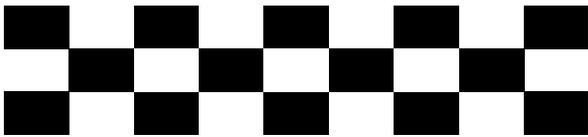
It is 8pm on a Thursday.

As you enter the shop, there are three things to notice: The black and white checkered tiled floors, the bright orange barber chair circa 1960, and fifty hooks arranged on the wall on your left that extend up towards the ceiling, accompanied by hats of all description: Cowboy hats, top hats, baseball caps, derby hats, flat caps, bowlers, and beanies.

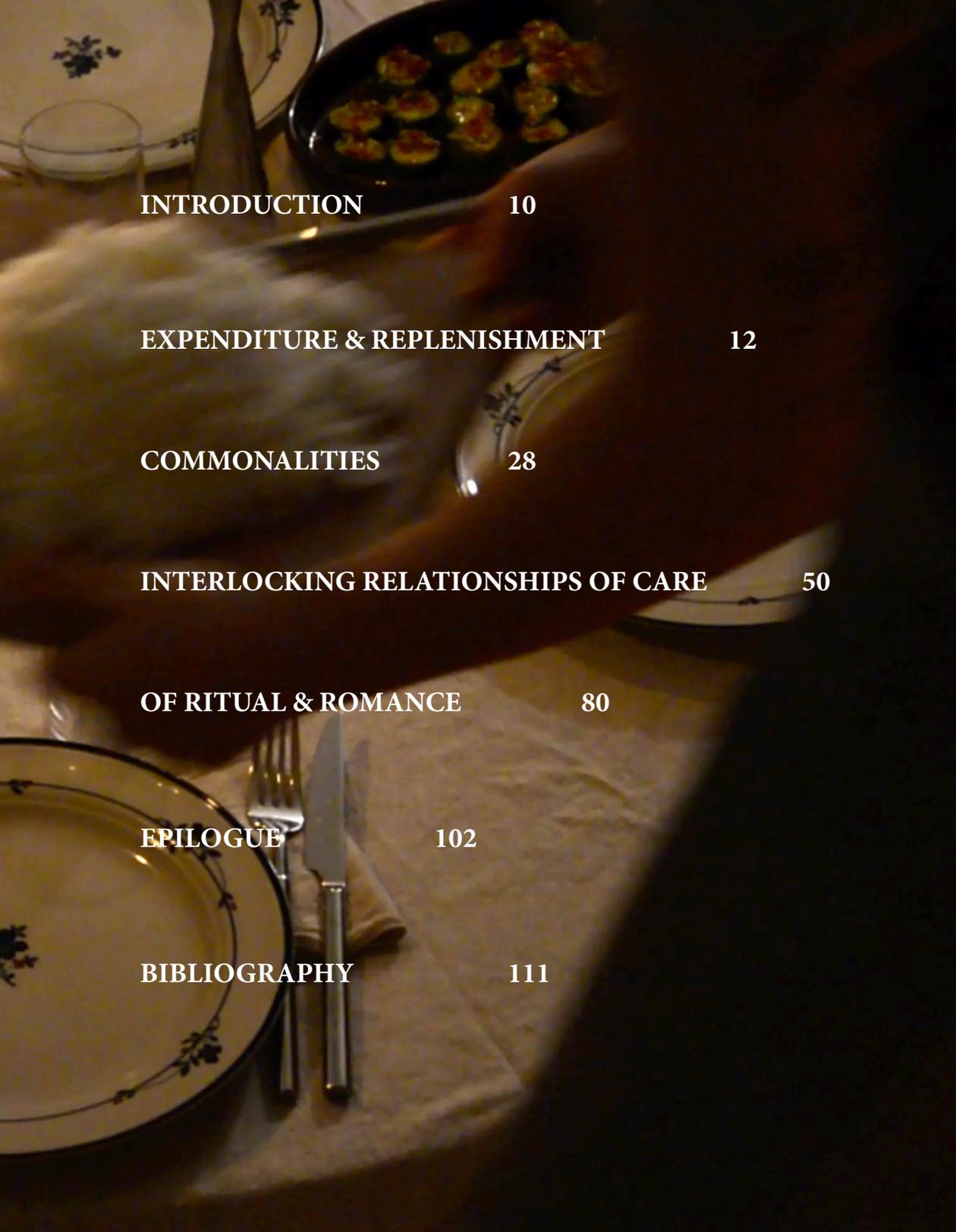
Matthew's Barbershop is a world of oddities. When I arrive before opening, the first thing I do is grab the cardboard box from the back closet and, one by one, I take hats off hooks and place them in the box. Knick-knacks get hidden away, sharp tools and extension cords are put in their compartments and the glasses are brought out and placed in the freezer, to slowly reach their perfect chill. Matthew's hand carved wooden lamp is turned on, all the overhead lights are turned off, and one by one each table gets their very own fifteen-inch red tapered candle.

The chairs get pushed around until the corners of the shop become their own modest circles. The music is turned on – I usually start and end the evening with *Tezeta*, an instrumental by Mulatu Astatke. I reach up toward the open sign hanging by the shops front window and pull the string to cast neon pink and blue onto the sidewalk ahead. I make myself a drink and patiently wait for that friend or that stranger to share my time with, in this little shop we called Five Seats.

Prologue.







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Most of my memories consist of lively dinner parties. Hands moving in every direction when the food is brought out. The piano bench for the kids to sit on, the fold out table necessary to fit everyone around the meal, and always endless stacks of plates. These experiences and traditions were curated by my heritage and have a strong presence in the work I design. I intend to understand and create interlocking relationships of care, where ritual and romance lead the way to form a community; designing and making objects and furniture that reassert hospitality within the home.

Hospitality is an act of surrender and generosity. I look to bring my guests into a warm and welcoming room not just to have them sit in interest, but to add their voice and views on what they are experiencing. I surrender my perspective to theirs and together we form a unique, unrepeatable event.

My design settings are meant to bring people close together, evoke curiosity, and as a group find joy in the details. My use of shape, line, and colour brings these sentiments together in the form of an object. Each object plays a role in a larger picture – simultaneously existing within and creating the space in which it will be found. Furniture and objects come in shapes and scales unfamiliar and perplexing but that retain more than a sense of their purpose. Each piece has been designed in parts, and only once brought together exist as a whole, to be experienced.

Introduction.

EXPENDITURE

&

REPLENISHMENT

A glass of scotch.

It is the beginning of April, winter is over, yet spring is taking too long to arrive. The temperature is at a crisp cool, the sun is shining with a sky of uninterrupted blue. The day is ours.

And with this freedom, we agree to travel to our spot by the river, pretending its summer, we bring a bottle of sparkling rose, a deck of cards, and some chips. I wrap a pair of crystal wine glasses in a T-shirt to add luster to the grey concrete slab beside the stream. That was important.

Hopping on our bikes we ride down the big hill, to the tree covered path that leads us to our spot. It extends into a low head dam stretching across the width of the river. The backpack gets unloaded, and our sparkles are poured into our already flickering crystal. A toast is made to summer, cheers, and sip. We hide the bottle from the cold air in the colder stream, nestled between two stones.

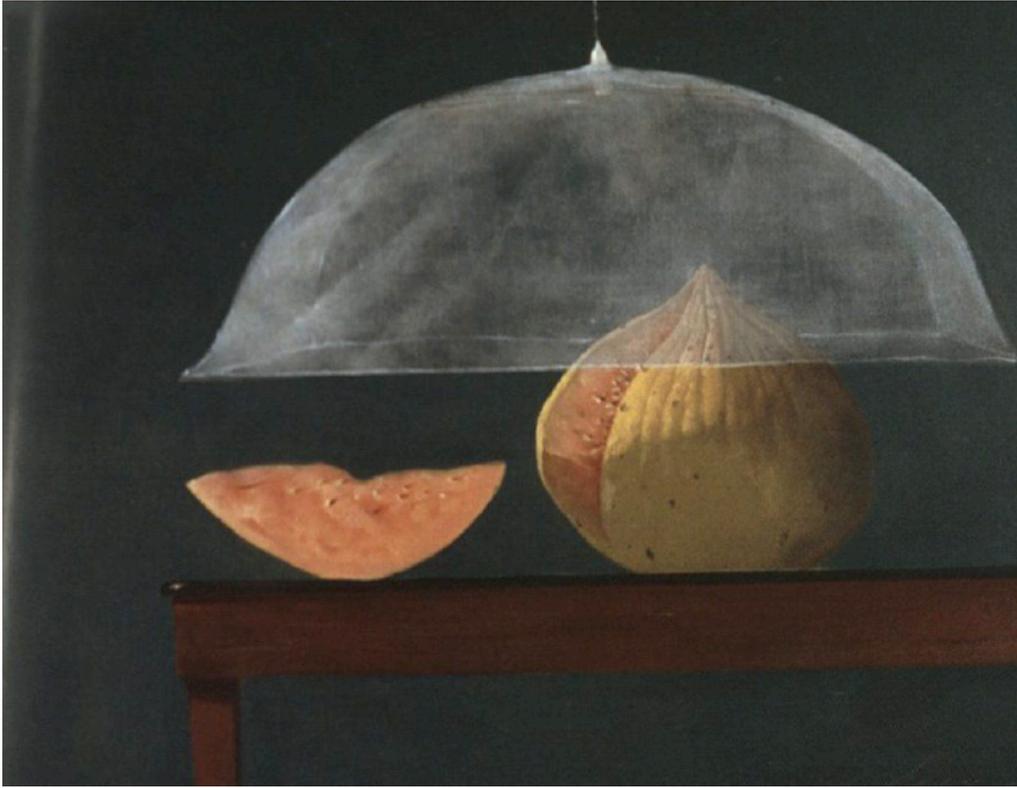
I perch at the edge of the dam and place my full pink glass on a lonely rock in the water. Slanted and precarious, it looked perfect. I ate some chips and lost at cards.

That was important.

That was important.

That was important.







Still Life includes man-made or natural objects, such as cut flowers, fruit, vegetables, fish, game, and wine. Originally, these paintings were a celebration of these material pleasures.

Artists began to take this interest in Still Life a step further with creating a genre called Vanitas painting. Vanitas paintings are inspired by Memento Mori, a category of painting whose Latin name translates to “remember that you have to die.” Like Memento Mori depictions, Vanitas Still Life often pair cut flowers and fruit with objects like human skulls, waning candles, and overturned hourglasses to comment on the fleeting nature of life. They are often a warning of the ephemerality of these pleasures and of the brevity of human life.

Julio Larraz, *Casabas Under Cover*, 1979
Jacl S. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Barbara Duncan Fund, 1986

Monika Varšavskaja
Cuhnja. Instagram, Cuhn-
ja, 12 July 2021, [https://
www.instagram.com/
cuhnja/](https://www.instagram.com/cuhnja/).

Ananas Ananas, Food Installation and Immersive Dining Experience with Bernardo Gv and Alejandro Zarate. Shot by Shelby Moore, 2021

The work of Ananas Ananas provokes questions. It is the uncertainty and strangeness of their displays that cause the guests and viewers to question the “right” way to approach the food. Creates an internal dialogue and a certain understanding of how we are “meant” to eat, and what is our relationship to the food itself. In some ways it brings individuals to their most vulnerable state before bringing them together. Acknowledging the food, the forms and objects that connect us to it, and the experience of feeling united with a community of people there to enjoy and experience the moment together.

Ananas Ananas, Masa Para Ofrenda with Greer Rochford and Pocoapoco, shot by Héctor Ramírez, 2021

Nobile Produzione,
J & Shozo Toyohisa.
Europäisches Besteck-Design 1945-2000:
the Bauer Design
Collection

Experience design is the concept and belief in the romance of sharing an experience. It draws on users' needs, feelings, contexts, and mindsets to design experiences that center on them. In this case, the event is a dinner party, beginning from the moment upon entering the home, to sitting down for a meal, to toasting drinks. If we talk about food, we inevitably talk about people, culture, and human connection. This concept creates a common ground, making human connection and dialogue inevitable. When you experience a design, you receive a once-in-a-lifetime work of art. The work is temporary and needs to be enjoyed mindfully and in the present moment. It is a chance to immerse yourself into what is happening then and there because it will end, it will be eaten. It is a chance to acknowledge the food, the forms and objects that connect us to it, and the experience of feeling united with a community of people there to enjoy and experience the moment together.

This is the Core.



Novvy Plates



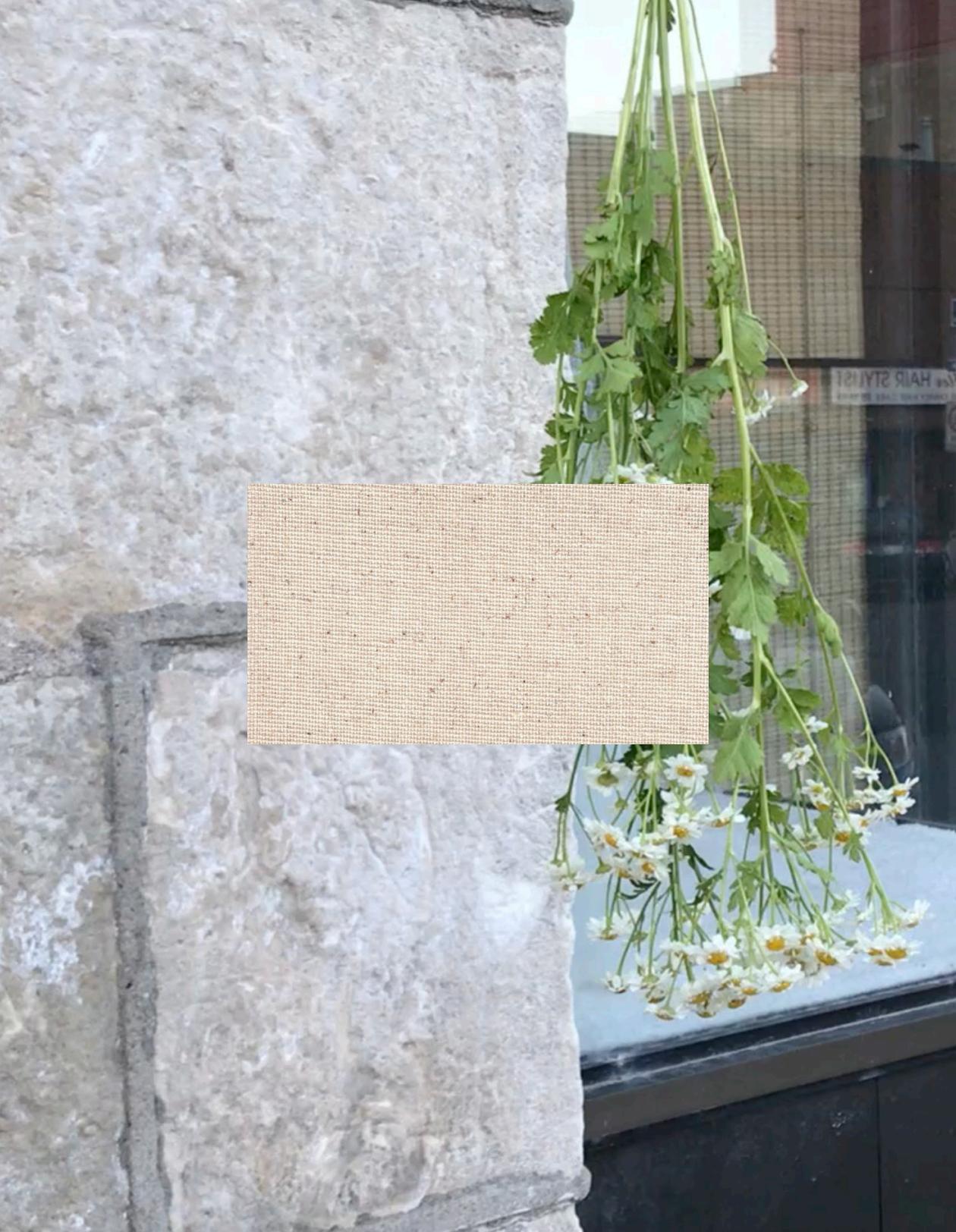
A Record of Something.



Sometimes when I'm sitting at a dinner party, be it floor or dining table, rubbing shoulders with others, surrounding the food and all the shapes that make a setting, I zoom into movements of hands presenting, reaching, and offering. The landscape of the table shifts. Forks are misplaced and later returned to their rightful holders. Drops of wine appear on linens. Shapes are emptied and refilled. The colours differ yet seem well thought out, like trees on rocks on water.

These shifting shapes are eventually cleared, leaving a once bare canvas painted with offering hands.

In between Conversations.



To be hospitable is not as simple as cleaning up your home and cooking a meal for your friends or family. It takes practice and letting go of the idea that your home is supposed to look a certain way and feel a certain way. Sharing food and conversation with people and creating the intimate spaces for these experiences to happen is the center of what gives hospitality meaning.



Being a host is about generosity. It is also in the effort of challenging yourself, in risking total failure that shows your guests how very much you love and care about them. Finding the beauty in the preparation, the conversation and the clean-up and bringing focus to those moments of company.



COMMONALITIES

Scalloped glass & uncut logs

Why is it so exciting to see a single fried egg on a plain white plate? Or hundreds of little caviar pearls in a scalloped glass dish?

Why is it so satisfying to see a perfectly clear ice cube that disappears in your glass? Or to experience pouring water over a fire and all that is left are glowing orange embers and a very loud hiss?

What is so good about a perfectly dipped soft serve ice-cream cone? Or driving by a lumber mill surrounded by walls of uncut logs?

On Process.



Morning.

She is carrying her flowers at the market, stopping to smell them every so often. Feels the warmth of the sun, appreciates it, and puts it in her pocket for later. On a walk she notices the leaves changing, the casual blue sky, stopping to pick up her favourite leaf off the sidewalk. When she gets home, she reaches for a vase for the flowers, maybe the ceramic one her friend gave her for her birthday last year. She trims the ends, fills the vase with cool water from the tap. She hums, listening to a new song she hasn't quite learned the words to yet.

Wanting to make bread for the evening, she starts her dough, mixing it to a kitchen counter beige, looking forward to the smell of yeast and the eventual aroma, the scent her home will soon be full of. She calls a friend to see if they want to come over and hum and smell bread together.

Day.

First light a candle, no artificial light, possibly a window. The space is a familiar home, an open interior, nature surrounds, a log cabin next door. There is of course a table where gathering can take place. The four parts of the table are rolled and shifted, until the three logs find their place, gently nested under their roof. Rustic and sophisticated the table becomes a place to unwind, a place for lounging, chatting, smoking, and drinking

aperitifs. It seems as though it could be completely at home in the sunny villa of 1967's "La Piscine", floating gently above the wide terra cotta expanse of Saltillo tile. The most beautiful moments are during "golden hour" when the light of the day is welcomed in and interacts with the objects in the space and provides a sort of gentle stillness. Then starts the laughter, the hugs, the embraces. Each object is just as much intentional as the people in the space.

Evening.

Three loaves of bread fill the table, symmetrical and perfect for slicing. The bread is soft, warm, and steamy inside, and brown and crispy on the outside. When you crack the loaf in half, crumbs sprinkle everywhere, and steam rises. Beside them, a platter of dips; spicy, nutty, creamy, beige, red, and white. It is time for dinner on the floor, a soirée.

Food, wine, more candlelight, darker day light, soft cushions, warm and cool air. Familiar.

She'll end the day outside again, walking, looking up at the stars. She'll think of the flowers, the bread, the cool tap, her friend. Happy with the day.

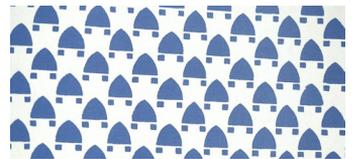
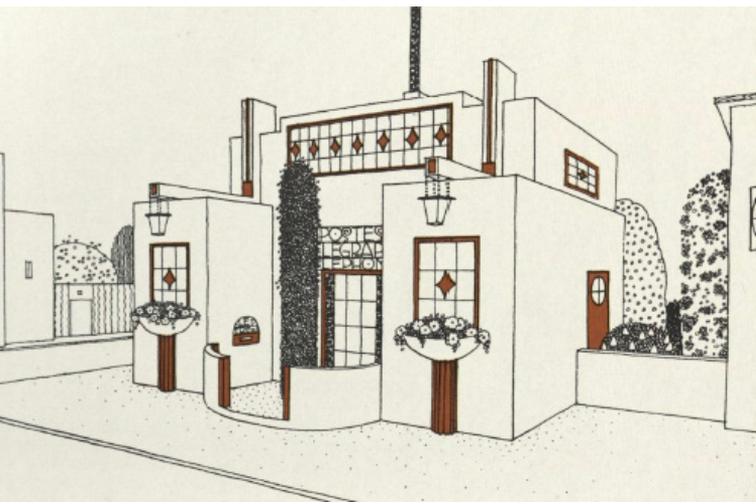






Maude Dining Table.





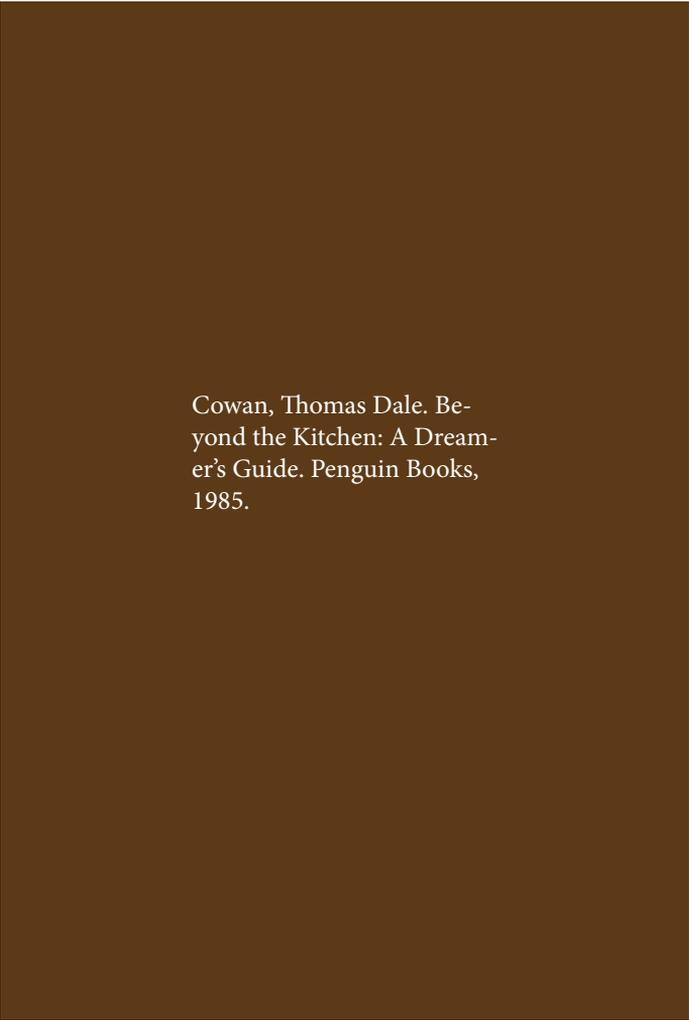
In this urban age of ribbon development, expanding new towns and mushrooming housing, the rustic has become precious, rare – a quality to be treasured, conserved, and emulated.

White walls and ceilings, highly polished floors and an island block inset with a beautiful blue and white basin make this kitchen-dining room a bright and cheerful space. In addition, the large windows take full advantage of the view over the wooden mountainside.

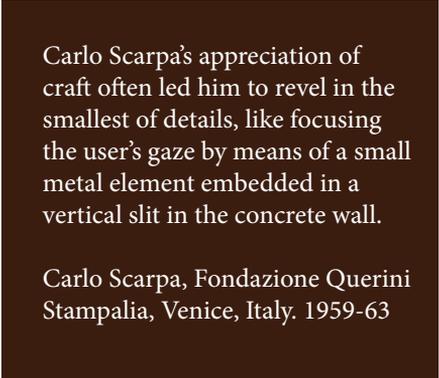
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Cowan, Thomas Dale. Beyond the Kitchen: A Dreamer's Guide. Penguin Books, 1985.



Carlo Scarpa's appreciation of craft often led him to revel in the smallest of details, like focusing the user's gaze by means of a small metal element embedded in a vertical slit in the concrete wall.

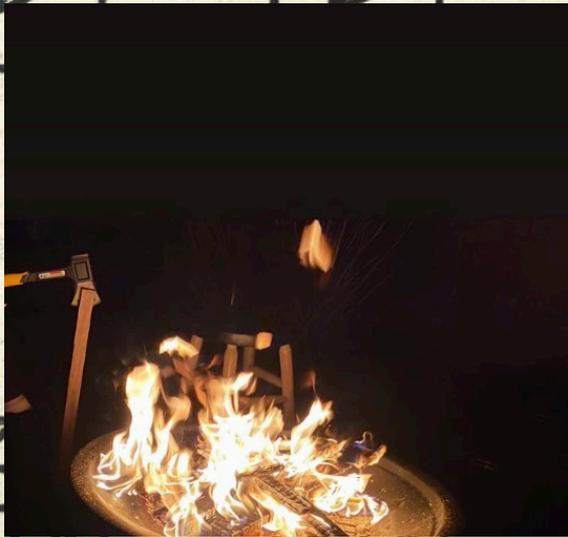
Carlo Scarpa, Fondazione Querini Stampalia, Venice, Italy. 1959-63

I used to wait for the time of year my parents would pack us up and head up north to our friend's cottage. We would light a fire every night and the flames would cast orange glows on faces and grass, surrounding us as if we were in the one room in a house not lit.

When I lived alone, I would take a wine bottle and forcefully shove the end of a tall, tapered candle where the cork once lived, and I would light the wick. With a butter knife I would move the melted wax pooled around the top, determining where each drip of wax would go. The drips would surround the black glass bottle. Once the candle was out, it would be replaced with another, and the melted wax would drip over other drips until you could no longer see the bottle.

As an adult my lamps have dimmers, and my candle stash is full. I have one wooden lantern that hangs off the wall. It is an archway, and the candle gets placed in the center. The flame always flickers too high and scorches the top of the arch. It might catch fire one day, or just disintegrate over time. I still light the candle.

Today I went for a walk, just after sunset. The sky was no longer orange and pink, but not yet completely dark. I don't think I've noticed that in between before. It was nice, but I missed the orange cast on faces and grass.





Sister Lamp & Sister Side Table.







Hum and smell bread together.

INTERLOCKING

RELATIONSHIPS

OF CARE

One slice, full pie.





Two dashes
One ounce
Two ounces
One

Orange bitters
Dry vermouth
Gin
Lemon Twist

A perfectly balanced martini.



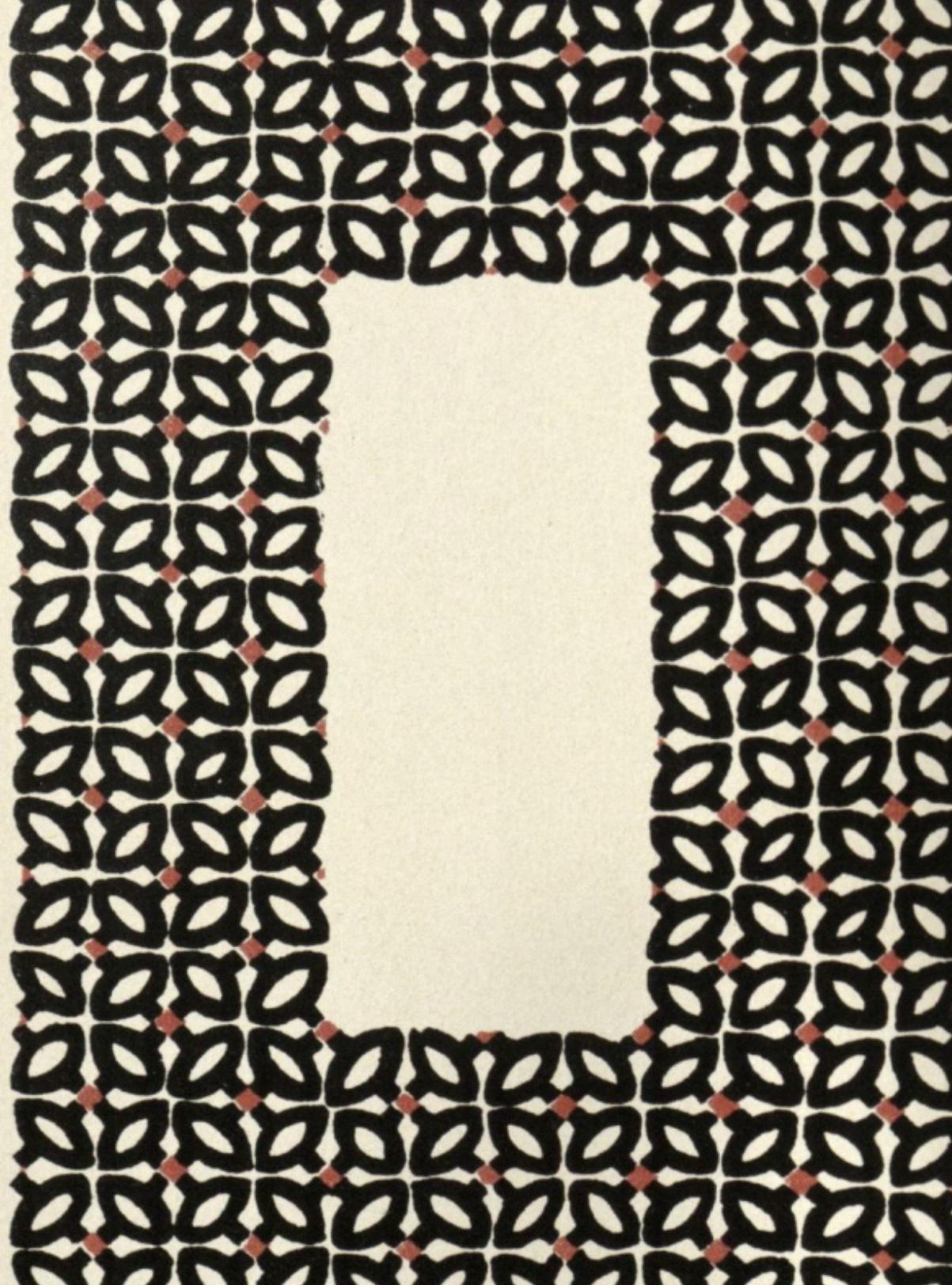


A low table made with hardwood ash that uses a simple connection to house three cylinders under a circular roof. The carved channels on the underside of the tabletop form a triangular pattern extending to the edge of the wood. The tabletop puts trust in the legs to create tension against one another, keeping them in place, while creating a stable surface. The only way for the object to be whole is when four separate elements are rolled around and shifted into place. This work is about balance, about trust, and the connection between the interdependent parts.

Asta Coffee Table.

There are nineteen of us in my immediate family. Every holiday or celebration we uncover the fold out table to magically elongate our dining room. I would undoubtedly be the one asked to set the table. I always tried to give every setting enough room, but chair legs would touch chair legs and, later, elbows would touch elbows.

The kids always sat on the piano bench drawn in from the other room, it could easily fit three.









Igor & Lora Bench and Stool.



Growing up there was a dividing wall covered with thin rectangular mirrors separating our kitchen and living room. Its simple presence created two distinct environments.

In the kitchen, an orchestra. Spoons hitting glass bowls, knives on cutting boards, searing on pans and the constant sound of the oven fan. The matter of food was so important that loving familial relationships devolve into needless bickering until the food reaches the table.

In the living room, there patiently waits the crowd, calm and with no interest on what is occurring on the other side.

Studies of a Suburban Home.





Rambling Women Room Divider.



Salatim, Salads:

Baba Ghanoush

Israeli salad

Cabbage salad

Tabbouleh

Chatzilim, eggplant

Matbilim, Dips:

Serve with; Laffa, Pita, Olive oil & Za'atar

Humus

Tahini

Labneh, yogurt dip

Matbucha, cooked tomatoes and peppers

Schug, cilantro garlic dip

Hamutzim, Sour:

Pickles

Olives

Pickled beats

Pickled turnips

Harifim, Spicy:

Hot pickled peppers

Harissa

Mezze.

A set of four organically- shaped plates puzzled together into one large platter that becomes the runner of a table. To hold the Salatim, Matbilim, Hamutzim, and Harifim.









The wine someone brings to your home when you've invited them over for dinner. The salt someone adds to the pot of soup you've already salted. Building a home with another and moving the couch around ten times before finding the right spot. Deciding whether the Manhattan should be garnished with an orange twist or a marischino cherry. Weaving a tapestry with a friend. Connecting threads with threads and strips to strips.









Many small bowls.



OF RITUAL

&

ROMANCE

Coffee in the morning, martinis at night.

I walked into the kitchen, stood there for a moment, and made a mental list of what I needed to do before people arrived. I started by making a stack of all the plates I want to use. I count one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven medium sized plates and place them on the counter. Next, the large green serving plate, brown oval bowl, ceramic circular plates, and small saucers. After I take a spoonful of the borscht that I made the evening before, I start chopping the onions to caramelize. I toss them into their pan with a spoonful of sunflower oil, turn the heat to medium and wait to hear the sizzle. Back to the cutting board. I start thinly chopping the mushrooms. Sizzle, heat down to low, stir onions, add a chunk of butter, stir again. The pot of water boils, and I thoughtfully plop the perogies in, trying to not get any splatters of hot water on my arms. Stir again. I wash the cherry tomatoes, the radishes and the green onions and chop them to a roughly bite size shape, I lay them out on my large green serving plate, ordering them by colour. Pink and white radishes, green, green onions, and red, orange, and yellow cherry tomatoes. Stir again, add in the mushrooms, the salt, the pepper, and stir again.

The perogies were drained, the borscht was hot, the rye bread was sliced, the butter was cut, and the onions and mushrooms were almost caramelized.

A Russian Dinner Party.

I began to carefully open the sharp small tins of salty fish, and then the sharp small tins of saltier fish, and placed them in the small saucers. It is almost seven, the dinner party starts at seven. Nobody will show up on time. I put the tablecloth on the table, then took it off and put another tablecloth on the table. I placed the medium sized plates and the eleven forks down, realizing I would have to serve the borscht in mugs. I need more bowls. The bar top held the water glasses, the shot glasses, the water jug, and the two candles I planned to light later in the evening. Onions are done. Music on and wait.





Cook with fire
Preserve ingredients
Save the seasons
Participate in the timeless
Learn to improvise
Never measure
Always measure
Be vulnerable
Cook for days
Stop making sense
Making as a thing to do
Cooking as a thing to do
Make drinks
Light candles
Take care of strangers
Drink wine
Wine as a companion
Clean your plate
Share you plate
Put it back into the ground
The only challenge is time
Make friends
Keep reading
Visit the mountains and eat there
Food tastes better in the wild
Food tastes better when it's wild
Eat with your fingers
Failure is a fine option

A Very Important List.

Take risks
Cook it until you understand
Always offer a friend a book
Cook with colour
Make with colour
Set the table
Get your hands dirty
Sharpen knives
Carry the spices home in your pockets
Eat with spoons
Fall in love with wood
Enjoy nice things
Journey into the night
Set off the smoke alarm
Eat the photo shoot
Cook to keep the house warm
Always write a menu, even the small ones
Write about it until you understand it
Clean your kitchen
Don't lose the plot
Build a table
Eat on the floor
Make lists
Cook barefoot
Make a book
Eat small fish
Make stock
We survive on the same things



Landscapes & Tablescapes.



There is something about working in kitchens and the relationship you make with the sink.

A French country kitchen, in a little stone farmhouse, plopped in the centre of a small town. The fullest time of the year was summer. The chef's guiding rule was, "nothing goes to waste." When vegetables are being pulled from our soil daily, we race to preserve their truth. He was a dreamer.

The sink in this kitchen was a large stainless-steel box that had a divider straight down the middle with two separate drains on either side. It was not the sink that the dishes would be washed in, but the sink meant solely for rinsing the fruits and vegetables. There is this childlike vigour in me when I see twenty heads of lettuce or thousands of little peas whooshing around in the clear water in these abyssal sinks. The lively colour of the vegetables looks even more vibrant when framed by the steel, getting crisper with each dunk in cold water.

It was the end of strawberry season, and we were gifted bales upon bales of beautiful, red, plump strawberries all summer. The farmer brought us our last bunch the evening before we closed for our weekend. I get a phone call at 8pm on a Sunday, it was the chef. He needed me to go in and wash all the fresh strawberries, to preserve them that night. I go.

A Dreamer.

I arrive and start filling both sides of the sink with cold water, harmonicas playing in the background. One side of the sink meant for dumping each strawberry pint in, one by one. They swish around, they get scooped out, they are put into the next side of the sink for a final rinse. One side of the sink has constant interruptions as each pint gets dropped in, pushing the berries on top down to the bottom, the other side is a still red.

There is something about working in kitchens and the relationship you make with the sink.

Curation is the practice of selecting, organizing, and presenting. It is deciding where the colours will exist on an object you are making, what shape that object will hold. Where the object will live, on a floor, a rug or on a table. It is determining how the object is used. Under what light? Curation is presenting an entire experience. It is an access to community.

Five Seats Cocktail Bar was my earliest involvement in curating a space of my own. Collaborating with my partner on each decision. What the menu will be that night, where the chairs will go, where to sprinkle the rose petals on Valentines, what colour rope to drape over our patio stanchions, which wildflower will be placed on each drink. Through curation, we were able to force other peoples viewpoints, which in turn changed their undersanding, belief, representation, and relation to the space and the others within it.

On Curation.







I come from a Russian-Ukrainian-Jewish household.

Some of the “rules” I was given when sharing my first drinks with my family were to drink with a meal, make a toast before every sip, and make eye contact when touching glasses, these rules feel special to my life personally, and I bring them into my home, eating and drinking with friends and family.

When I decided to host a Russian-style dinner with my friends, a party based on the raucous affairs I grew up with. I told everyone about the rules, and without thinking we were all in it, together. Every sip prompted another earnest toast, even on trivial matters. Every clink came with proper eye contact and big grins. By the end of the meal everyone was elated and full. The concept of attention and care around approaching others at a table is something important to me. So, with the tableware I design I think about the interaction it will instigate between two people.

Salt & Pepper Standing Stones.





There is something so sweet about offering someone potatoes from a dish and kneeling it toward them with your fingertips, to let go and watch the dish and the potatoes rock back and forth.



These are objects that help create the environment for hosting a gathering. Objects that reassert hospitality in a home, the characters that help set a scene.

The lighting sets the mood, like in a film or a photograph. Light helps the audience understand what they are experiencing, it intensifies the emotions of a scene, and conjures up particular feelings. The lamp or the candle are used to curate focus within the environment, drawing attention to specific details.

Textiles are used to soften and delineate a space. They help anchor furniture in a room which in turn helps create intimate spaces within a larger setting.

While perceptions of colours are subjective, there are colours that hold certain meaning and are important to include within a hospitable setting.

Orange, being a high energy colour, has an uplifting affect within a room where lots of activity takes place. Blue is used to create a calming and relaxing environment. Brown brings about feelings of warmth, comfort, security, and reliability. Associated with a natural and down to earth environment.

Epilogue.

In a system of harmonizing space, I use light and dark browns to add a sense of relatability, and nurturing comfort. A space that feels as if it's on a neutral platform without any hierarchies.

The table, a gathering place. A space for connection, weighted, sturdy and grounded. The tableware activates the table, focusing on objects that provoke interaction and attention.

These objects are brought to this dinner party to create the environment that can help facilitate a personal and memorable experience. A fleeting moment in time that gets one to be fully present and generally happy.





“They converge around the table next to his. They bring over an extra chair - there are five of them - and sit down. Even before the waiter comes, before they have ordered anything to drink, they are already connected by an invisible, unspoken pact. They are different ages, two of them with thick beards, and yet all their differences are about to disappear into the circle they’ve already created. They talk, but it doesn’t matter what they’re saying - it almost looks like they’re rehearsing for a song they’ll sing together, trying out their voices. Their laughter fills up the space inside the circle - jokes, even hackneyed ones, are completely appropriate, even called for. It’s low, vibrating laughter that conquers the space and makes the tourists at the next table over be quiet - middle-aged women suddenly startled. It attracts curious gazes. They’re preparing their audience. The appearance of the waiter with a tray of drinks becomes an overture, while the waiter, just a kid, becomes their unwitting MC, announcing the dance, the opera. They liven when they see him; someone’s hand goes up and shows him where to put things- here. There is a moment of silence, and now glass rims are raised to lips. Some of them - especially the impatient ones- are unable to resist shutting their eyes, exactly like in church when the priest solemnly places the white wafer on the outstretched tongue. The world is ready to be overturned -it’s only a convention that the floor beneath our feet, while the ceiling is overhead, the body no longer belongs to itself, but is instead a part of a live chain,

Excerpt from Olga Tokarczuk’s *Flights*

a section of a living circle. Now, too, glasses travel to lips, the moment of their emptying practically invisible, taking place in rapid-fire focus, with momentary gravity. From here on out they will hold onto them - the glasses. The bodies seated around the table will begin to describe their rings, tops of heads indicating circles in the air, first smaller ones, then larger ones. They will overlap, tracing new chords. In the end, hands will come up, in gestures to illustrate their words, and then they will roam to companions' arms, to their back and shoulders, patting and encouraging them. These will in fact be gestures of love. This fraternizing by way of hands and backs is not intrusive; it's a kind of dance"

IN

THIS

FORM,

TOGETHER

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