

Studienprojekt 2021\*2022

A stylized, high-contrast illustration of an outdoor cafe scene. Several people are seated at tables under a large, leafy tree. The scene is set in front of a building with a sign that reads 'ELITE GARRIGOS Aduanas RANSTOS'. The overall style is graphic and modern, with a focus on the social and architectural aspects of the environment.

# **Ageing Cities – What we have learned from Architecture...**

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## Introduction

How are cities and urban designers responding to the challenge of population ageing? How can we as ethnographers understand the social and material transformations underway in their efforts to shape ‘ageing-friendly’ cities or cities ‘for all ages’? These are two of the leading research questions of our ethnographic study project “Ageing Cities” on which we worked together in the academic year 2021-2022. Our main concern has been to explore the distinctive intergenerational design challenges of what some architects

and urban planners are beginning to call “Late Life Urbanism.”

Our exploration included an excursion in April 2022 to Alicante, Benidorm and neighbouring urban enclaves in the Costa Blanca (Spain). The area is relevant as ageing bodies and practices have become, since the 1960s, a sort of vector of urbanisation in the region: developing into what some geographers call “the Pensioners’ Coast”.

Considering the intriguing history of migration of this region, with pensioners from all over Central and Northern Europe (but also from other regions of Spain) relocating there, the “Pensioners’ Coast” is an interesting experimental ground to witness what happens when older bodies take centre-stage. Over the course of seven eventful and exciting days we had the chance to explore how sensitised urban





designers from the area respond to the inter-generational design challenges these bodies bring in different ways. In a joint endeavour with STS-inspired architectural researchers from the Critical Pedagogies, Ecological Politics and Material Practices research group of the University of Alicante, the visit allowed us to explore different approaches to architectural practice where older people have more active roles in the design and management of ageing cities (from cooperative senior cohousing to inter- and multigenerational housing projects, as well as accessible public space infrastructures, ranging from sidewalks to beaches and public transportation).



With this Zine we wish to share some of our main reflections, learnings to engage ethnographically with late life urbanism in Costa Blanca (or should we say eng-age?). The Zine could be taken as a long thank you note and a memoir of our encounters with different initiatives. But we also see it as a relevant intergenerational gift of sorts, lent to future urban researchers on these topics.

## Shadowing Ageing Bodies

As ethnographers we not only use our senses to get a grasp of our fields of study or analyse them, but our whole body is usually very much involved in such practices. We are there, we empathise, get to know things and change our perspectives ‘as bodies’. However, in the project we kept asking ourselves how we could address late life urbanism from

our very bodies. How could our six younger bodies understand how older bodies move and what those embodiments and practices mean?

In Alicante we had the chance to explore different multimodal approaches combining creativity and bodily awareness, amongst them shadowing: an approach to mobile urban ethnography that dynamically engages the bodies, minds, and sensibilities of researchers

in short wanderings, following others,

something especially relevant when language might not be the best way to grasp what is at stake.

Even if we would have loved to talk to many of these peo-

“I am standing on the pavement with a notepad and pen in my hands, watching the people passing by. When I see an older woman, I take notice. I approach her and as a shadow I accompany her on her way across the square. Traffic lights, pavements, thresholds - all obstacles on her way? Where she stops, I stop. My body is waiting for action and movement while hers is still. I ask myself which route she is going to choose and where she might be heading, when, suddenly, the woman changes direction with her walker and starts her way back to where our shadows met first.”

(Fieldnotes, Alicante)

ple we tailed, none of us were able to speak Spanish in a way people would understand us, neither would we have been able to understand them. That threshold of ungraspability made us explore the practice of field note taking otherwise: Hence becoming shadows.

Shadows are signs of the opacity of bodies, indexes of light not being able to go through particular bodies. And, yet, our shadows accompany us and are tied to us, bearing witness of our very movements, mimicking them. Thus, we attempted

to do the same: follow movements through space, closely but remaining unnoticed most of the time. The key principle of shadowing is accompanying but trying not to interfere. In doing so, we became attentive to older bodies, not as ill or challenged bodies, but as bodies that move in peculiar ways, learning to appreciate their particular movements, and attempting to understand the reasons for movements and their routes through public space.



## Sketching older people's spaces

In those days in Alicante, we not only attempted to shadow older bodies. We also experimented with what architectural researchers might teach us to see and conceive the relations of these bodies with peculiar spaces. Field notes are one of the most important features of ethnographic research. How they are taken depends on many factors, dispositions and skills, as well as decisions each researcher has to make. Most anthropologists tend to use pen, paper, and notebooks to take field notes – mostly in the form of written words. But how to operate in a situation where words might not be the only way to grasp things, where our lack of linguistic skills might preclude the possibility of ethnographic engagement?

We were lucky to learn visual approaches from architectural researchers at the Critical Pedagogy, Ecological Politics and Material Practices Re-

search Group of the University of Alicante. One of them, José Carrasco, suggested an interesting approach. For instance, he introduced us to a few of them, like the bichromatic graphic mode allowing to make graphically visible complementary spaces of a specific area (e.g., public/private, car roads/bike roads) by using different colours to sketch. To overview spatial areas one could also take the view of an eagle. And why not take the perspective of a lamp? This graphic mode pushes the drawer to think of spatial-architectural structures from above, illuminating them like a ceiling light. Whereas focusing on specific points of view can help to understand a landscape structure, other approaches to sketching foreground temporal-spatial dimensions. For example, drawing overlapping steps can reveal a change in spatial configuration or the overlapping movements of different actors over a period of time; engaging with spatial processes en-

ables one to focus on drawing cycles. Considering elevations in space, José proposed, could be another mode to visually approach the immaterial and lived environment. Or sketching a building as you would have x-ray to look through its materialities. The graphic combination of plan and section could also be a way to find out about different spatial layers.

## examples

Following some of his visual protocols to understand spatial relations, we explored different forms of approaches and ways of analysing the entanglements of bodies and space(s) using sketches, models and

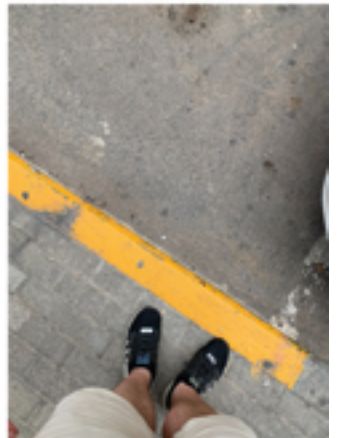
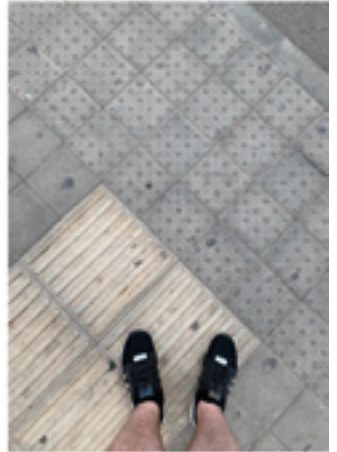
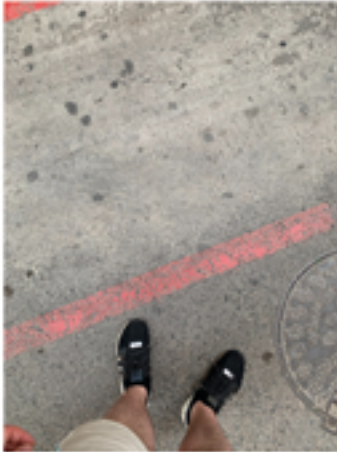
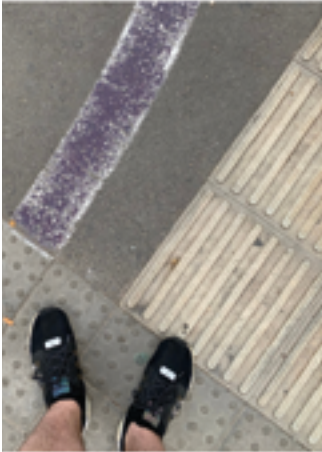
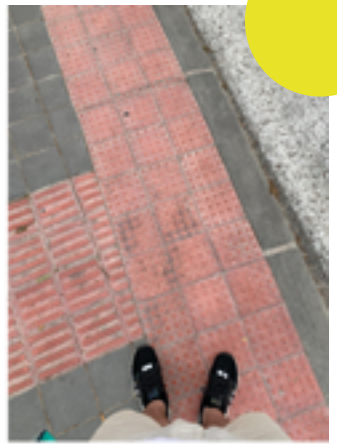
drawings as ways of paying attention and observing ageing bodies in public space.



Forming groups we explored different areas of the city of Alicante, such as: Carolinas Altas and Bajas, Tossal Park and Sant Ferran Castle, Esplanada d'Espanya, Santa Barbara Castle and Postiguat Beach, which seemed to be important to engage deeper with the late life infrastructures. Here are some examples of our experiments, giving a glimpse of our different engagements.





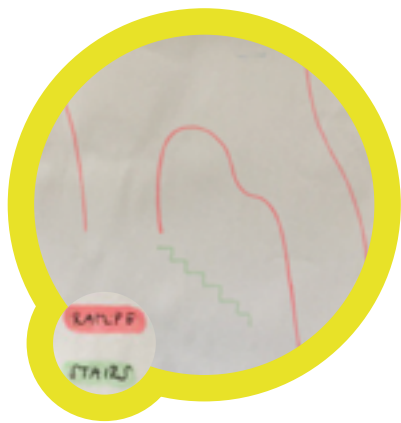


Through different colours and pavement textures, infrastructural design tries to help people to navigate through the city of Alicante.

## Christine

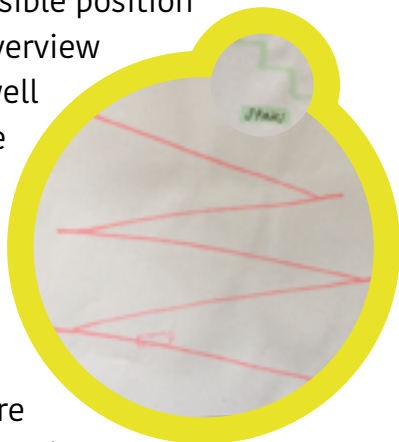


On the eastern slope of San Fernando Castle is the so-called Monte Tossal Theme Park. A large recreational area (63.000 m<sup>2</sup>) that extends over the terraced slopes of the mountain. In the area you can find facilities and places to practise various recreational activities, such as a skate park, a giant chess, climbing walls and much more.



But the park also invites you to take walks, enjoying the view of the sea and the city. Approaching the park questioning what possibilities its infrastructure offers for certain bodies, it is noticeable that there are many ramps that make it accessible for different users, bodies and vehicles. Colours indicate the slopes and are placed in a clearly visible position

on an overview map as well as on the paths.



At the same time, there are also boundaries to certain places, such as stairs or steep inclines that make it difficult or impossible to get there. Christine experimented with the graphic modes that José introduced us to, trying out different coloured graphic lines to capture the patterns that these different paths and

**Anna** photographically captured the variety of infrastructural interventions to promote the mobility of park visitors. When documenting the space, the simultaneity of different needs of the age groups could be observed. This harmonious meeting of the most diverse uses of the park, made possible by the landscape's features, shows how important it is to create a landscape of encounters, common play and relaxation for everyone using an intergenerational approach.



landscapes have in the park. Different widths, lengths and gradients become visible, suggesting different temporal dimensions produced by infrastructures.

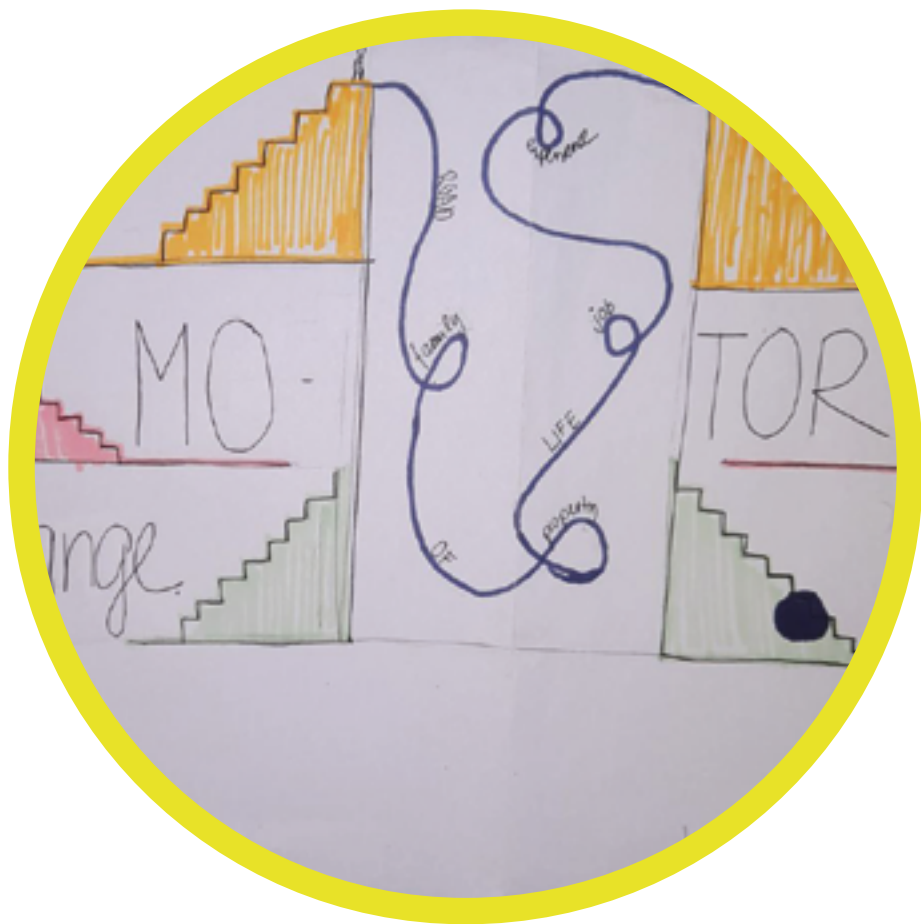


Visitors of the  
skate park



**Doreen** wanted to create an x-ray of an intergenerational building in Alicante. Her graphic approach became more creative and turned out to reveal a circle of (intergenerational) life. Motor, safety and exchange as the fundamentals of the building, that connect all generations. The interesting fact about this project espe-

cially was that people could only live there until the age of 35 and when they are over the age of 60. She visualised this by drawing a lifeline, separating the building. The creative method helped her focussing on the main issues of this project that stayed in her mind.



**Adam** observed several phenomena overlapping infrastructure with nature at San Fernando Castle. First, it's noticeable that watering tubes on the way to the castle are ordered in a grid way. The idea of horizontal-vertical structure is to be seen at the castle as well, where several vertical antennas were built. Besides that, these devices broadcast particular waves as a part of their

infrastructural function and vice versa, they vibrate and release sound as a consequence of the natural-artificial wind (of the Anthropocene). Rather different kind of human-made wind blows from a vertical ventilation shaft. A small number of crooked trees grow nearby, contrasting with regular vertical design of the antennas and the shaft.



**Erman** followed the intergenerational infrastructure of the Retirement Coast, which is shaped and continues to be shaped by mass retiree mobilities. The observations made in the process revealed a multitude of small-scale modernizations that made the transformation processes visible. Retirees coming from abroad are given the opportunity to participate in everyday and

local life through these often inconspicuous infrastructure gimmicks. Be it through purposefully placed seating, signs or sporting activity areas. And high above the city, on the Castillo de Santa Bárbara, it was also exciting to observe how ramps, elevators and information boards blended into the landscape and could influence the perception of these places.



Public equipment with cognitive and physical exercises at Playa del Postiguet

"It may interfere with your pacemaker!" Warning sign on top of the Castillo de Santa Bárbara



investigation could possibly tell a lot about local knowledge, fractures in public spaces, and in some cases failed urban planning. Moving through the urban space in the sense of Michel De Certeau's concept of the "rhetorics of walking" (De Certeau 1988: 192) how one person moves through the city is like a conversation between the pedestrian with their figures, rhythms, interpretations, and the public space.

[illegible]

Given the task of sketching older people's spaces in cities, he was interested in the movement. Inspired by the drawing of a dining table in progression by Sara Wiggleworth, Maximilian wanted to capture the trails of senior citizens using the intersection at the Praça de Pius XII. How are older pedestrians using the space? How is the navigation through the heavily trafficked intersection? Are there any shortcuts? How are high curbstones bypassed that otherwise become an obstacle with a walker?

In preparation for this exercise, he got his tablet and a pencil. Maximilian sketched the map of the Praça. Outlining the streets and direction of traffic, writing down important infrastructure close by (like pharmacies, opticians, bus stops, cafes, etc.) he created a small map that he would later use as a template.

Starting the exercise he followed people who seemed to

be older than 60. As he followed them at some respectable distance, the pencil on his tablet drew a line in whichever direction they would go. While experimenting with that method, Maximilian noticed that it might be important to mark when the person he followed stopped and jotted down little gestures he found noteworthy. Every time a person left the Praça de Pius XII into a side street he stopped tracking them and looked out for a new person to follow. After Maximilian chose whom to follow for a little stroll he created a new layer on top of the template. After he followed a few people Maximilian could overlay all the tracks and see what they might have in common.

In the reflection of that experiment, there always was the question of interpretation for him. Did the person take that longer route because it was safer or because it was easier or nicer? Was the look on the watch triggered by the long

red phase of the traffic light? Initially, those drawings can hint at interesting connections between the older pedestrians and the infrastructure we have to live in. But in the end, it is necessary to talk about, analyse, and maybe redraw the tracks that Maximilian sketched on his tablet.

The visual approaches we learnt from José accompanied us the rest of our journey. We continued to experiment with them, trying out our own ideas, always with the question in mind: how could sketches help us understand how infrastructures create, enable and prevent certain relationships between bodies and spaces?



## Flaneurs in Benidorm?

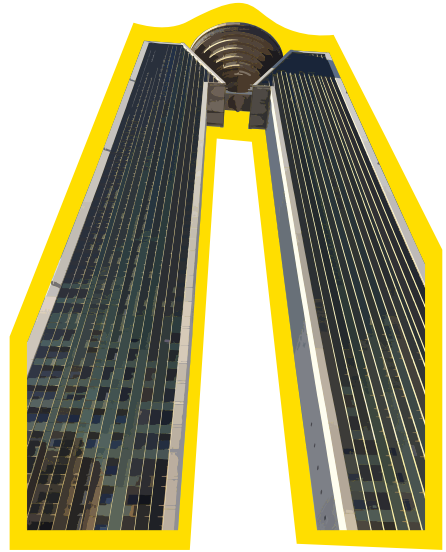
We strolled through the streets of Benidorm without a concrete goal. As much as we wanted to have one, which one could it be here?

Getting lost as one walks sounds so simple and yet, doing so, requires a precise and conscious observation of the environment, because those who do go through the urban space with an open eye. Strolling is the art of perceiving a city. But how can one be a flaneur in Benidorm?

We spent several days meandering in between skyscraper canyons, trying to understand what this kind of aimless form of walking might afford as an ethnographic method to understand late life infrastructures here.

During our field trip in the Costa Blanca, searching to rent motor wheelchairs or finding where walkers could be bought, we learned one thing: Urban

infrastructure determines our perception, and we determine the urban infrastructure. Supply and demand determine the shape of our cities and Benidorm is a perfect example of this.



A vertical city that attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors every year from Germany, England, and all over Europe.

A fully accessible landscape, full of strollers, ramps, podotactile pavements. Accessible everything, even accessible sand, baths and beaches?!

Strolling helped us to under-

stand the characteristics of this strange mixture of Coney Island and Manhattan by the sea. Paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, we were spectators of a peculiar late modern urban infrastructure.

Although this was not one of middle-upper class bodies observing a dress code. In there we mostly came across tanned bodies, naked bodies, drunk bodies, bodies dozing off in the calm breeze of the hot afternoon, bodies drifting like the calm waves of the Mediterranean, eating bodies, but perhaps above all: comfortable bodies?

We came to understand a bit more of this dreamy place as a territory of fictions and illusions for pensioners across Europe in one of our last nights, watching from a 20th floor the documentary *The man who bottled the sun*, telling the story of the mayor of Benidorm who enabled its unprecedented creation and brutal transforma-

tion from scratch, also luring older people here in extremely funny ways.

And then, all of our flaneurian strolls came together to form a thought in our heads. Could this be a place where comfort and relaxation has become the sole and most important urban infrastructure, where welfare and social democracy take the shape of a sky-scraper by the beach, tightly connected to the world with a high-frequency metropolitan railroad traveling along the 200 km of the coast to an international airport?

And there we were as well, in the place that bottled the sun, for the masses coming from afar, the main metropolis of the Pensioners' Coast: The city where accessibility becomes landscape?



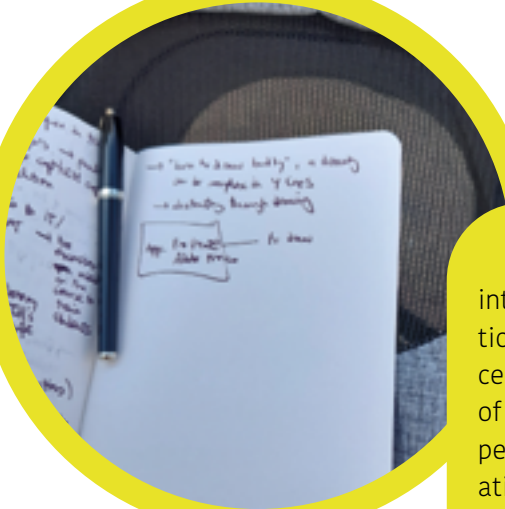
## Going places, meeting older people

During our stay we got to travel to different spots – some in the places where we were staying, but we also engaged in a bus tour-to meet rather different initiatives exploring distinct models of late life housing and living in the Costa Blanca.

The first place we visited was an **intergenerational building** in Alicante's city centre. This was a pilot project, planned and built by the city of Alicante's housing and social services department.



“This housing project demonstrated, especially during the Covid 19 pandemic, that an intergenerational community could be more resilient in dealing with challenges or crises. While many older residents were forced to stay at home because of pre-existing conditions or similar reasons, the younger residents went shopping for them. But this assistance also seemed reciprocal. This allowed younger residents who had not gained much household experience before moving in to ask their more experienced neighbors for help and make contacts.” - Maximilian



“The intergenerational building is interesting because the city administration itself initiated it and created one concept for different problems: infrastructure of health care, missing mobility of older people and housing shortage of all generations. The concepts have difficulties like a lack of participation and self-organisation of residents, but it points to what’s important for public institutions: protecting people and care.” - Doreen

“It has become clear how different social groups are affected differently by processes of ageing, for example by the lack of financial means. These forms of discrimination also lead to different experiences of ageing. How can state measures lead to more equitable ageing for all?” -

Christine



In **Teulada**, northbound in Costa Blanca we met the *Deutscher Club Costa Blanca*: an association founded for and by German pensioners who had relocated totally or partially to Spain. We were received in the building where they host their big meetings, and sitting around a long table, every single one of us was able to interview one of their members. We heard stories: of people saving for a lifetime to find another place to live after retiring,

like a guy searching for places with his van, falling in love with the place and deciding to stay; loads of particularities about Spanish real estate regulations and obligations; the legal conundrums of trying to receive the German retirement pension whilst living in Spain; or the relevance of the DCCB as a place to meet and continue having a life in German under the sun, whilst having family members at a distance.



“I was reminded of my own family history: my grandparents started their own pensioners story in Moraira-Teulada in the 80s. They built a house and went to Spain every winter from October to April (my birthday). The reason for this step was the good climate for my grandmother, who suffers from asthma, and the mild winter. There they were part of their own community, which consisted of Swiss, Germans, Dutch and a few Spaniards. They lived close to each other, going on trips together and taking care of each other when help was needed. Until my grandparents died, Moraira was their second home and an important place for our family.” -Doreen

“It was interesting to see how a small microcosm has developed here. At the same time, some members of the club expressed a desire to socialise more with locals. However, they found language barriers and the feeling that locals already have `their lives` and are therefore not dependent on new contacts to be challenges.”

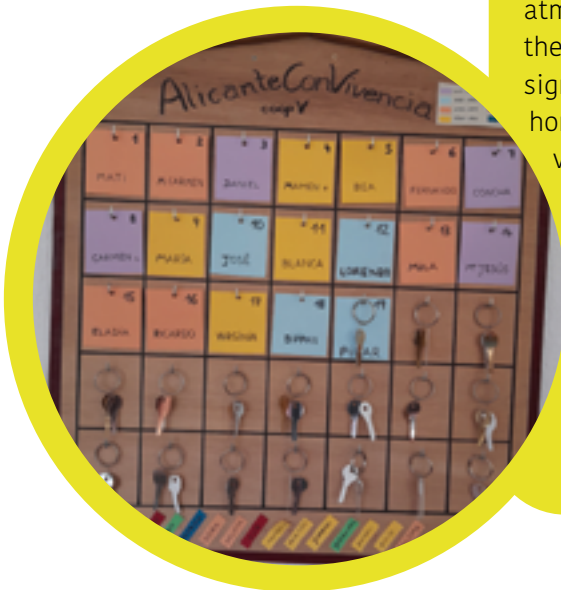
- Christine

Later, in the bus we brought all the stories together, like a puzzle, piece by piece, painting a picture where different ‘house-lives’ emerged, showing different attempts at searching for adventure and a better climate for a ‘healthier’ ageing.



We also got to visit the eco-friendly cooperative **Con-Vivencia**, a senior co-housing project in **Castalla**, in a rather rural area of Costa Blanca. We were greeted by the members of the cooperative with pael-la and other tasty foods . The convivial space of the meal paved the way to many conversations about their personal hopes and collective aspirations. After lunch, Jorge Toledo - the architect facilitating the development of both the community and the building pro-

cess and also the son of some of the instigators, explained the main aims behind the project, grounded on profound ecosocial ideas. Jorge talked us through the entrenched relationship between building a community and the building's development, the attempts at trying to work out tensions between the collective and personal aspects of the project, and the philosophy behind how people get incorporated in the project.



“I was very impressed by the energetic, forward-looking, and inspired atmosphere. The challenge, but also the privilege of directly helping to design and develop one’s own retirement home, has brought together a wide variety of people. The experience, skills, and ideas that each person brings to the project gave me the impression of a large community. I was particularly fascinated by how the decision-making process was handled and how the implicit knowledge was archived.”

- Maximilian



“I was fascinated seeing how the imagination of ageing is expressed in spatial practices and how they show in materialisation of alternative intergenerational futures. Also impressive to see what the group was doing and building, the commitment and energy they were putting in.” - Christine



“How do I imagine my future as an old person? - was a question that affected me a lot through the whole trip. In this project we saw older people taking care on their own about their future. Also the idea of a community with shared ideals (political, economical, social) sets this project apart from the others.” - Doreen

We also had the chance to visit the co-living project “**Suits United**“, originally conceived for multigenerational housing, but later on repurposed in a less age-restricted fashion. There we got to understand, going through the belly of a building under renovation, the material ‘programming’ of sites and users, and the differ-

ent ‘scripts’ of age that might condition, afford or hinder the uses of its communal spaces as well as the rooms. Many of these were discussed and explained when shown around by architect Joaquín García, working for the property to imagine and develop new possible uses.

“Taking a tour through the construction site I was really amazed by the naked structures of the soon to be well polished and furnished rooms. On some drywalls there were technical drawings, in the unplastered masonry there were the remains of a previous staircase and on the facade, there were traces of old fire escape ladders. These intimate traces of the spirit of the former building I found very fascinating. Buildings age and many stories, functions, and ideas are inscribed into their walls.”

- Maximilian



“Interesting how the architect’s ideas about the future residents were incorporated into the design of the house and the rooms.” - Christine



Doreen was caught by the imaginary process during the visit: how do future residents imagine their future here? In which way do architects act as a medium between imagination and materialisation? Questions that accompanied her during her fieldwork in Berlin.



## The bus as a storytelling device

*“I go through  
trillions of molecules  
that move aside  
to make way for me  
while on both sides  
trillions more  
stay where they are.”*<sup>1</sup>

These lines are part of a poem from the movie *Paterson* (2016), written by a bus driver character on his ordinary way through a city. In a similar fashion, on our trip across the long and winding road of the Costa Blanca, we came to learn how to become sensible to the movements of follow the trillions of molecules that had formed the place. On our way from Alicante to Teulada, then to Castalla and back to Alicante the bus came to operate as a peculiar storytelling device.

Acting as a tour guide, perform-

ing that role also with her architectural gaze, Ester Gisbert made us aware of how the urbanisation of the coast came to be. As we sat in the bus, listening to her words, we also started seeing, from within it, the molecules that formed the places we were passing through.

Ester talked at length about the formation of the particular landscape of the Costa Blanca. We listened to her geo-anthropological musings, as we observed the stark contrasts between the sea level on one side and two thousand metres high mountains of the Serra Gelada, just a few kilometres away from the shore on the other side.



<sup>1</sup> The poem was originally written by Ron Padgett and was called *The Run*.



redirected to provide for the needs of thirsty dwellers, also needing to flush their toilets in previously unforeseen frequencies in the area.

In enabling us to feel the moving molecules, the bus became a place where the deep time of the mountains and the rivers, older than any of its current inhabitants, met the recent but stark transformations of modernising humans. This made us understand how older bodies had come to utterly reshape the very landscape of Costa Blanca in the last six decades.

Driving on the highway we passed through Benidorm, witnessing from afar the city's dozens of high buildings in contrast to the relatively unpopulated area surrounding it. Highly concentrated infrastructures encircled by sea and soil.

With her words, Ester taught us to see the geological and ecological connections that the urbanisation process brought. As we listened on the bus, the molecules of the mountains turned into beaches or buildings, water streams were channelled and



On the long drive the bus became a place  
to share our findings within our group.



## Research Projects

After we returned to Berlin, these were the individual projects we worked in. Our field trip to Costa Blanca and the questions it made emerge, accompanied us, and helped us think about the architectural and cultural challenges of ageing cities.

### Alt\_er\_ing spaces and bodies of ageing - Virtual Reality in care homes [Maximilian]

Looking at these welcoming and carefully designed housing projects for seniors on the Costa Blanca, Maximilian wondered: what other forms of designed spaces for the elderly exist that form a mix of general design and individual needs. For example, when he compared the eco-friendly house project in Castella with the senior apartment in his grandma's retirement home, he quickly realised that the tension between nursing functionality and individual furnishings is dealt with very differently. An exciting idea that has quickly

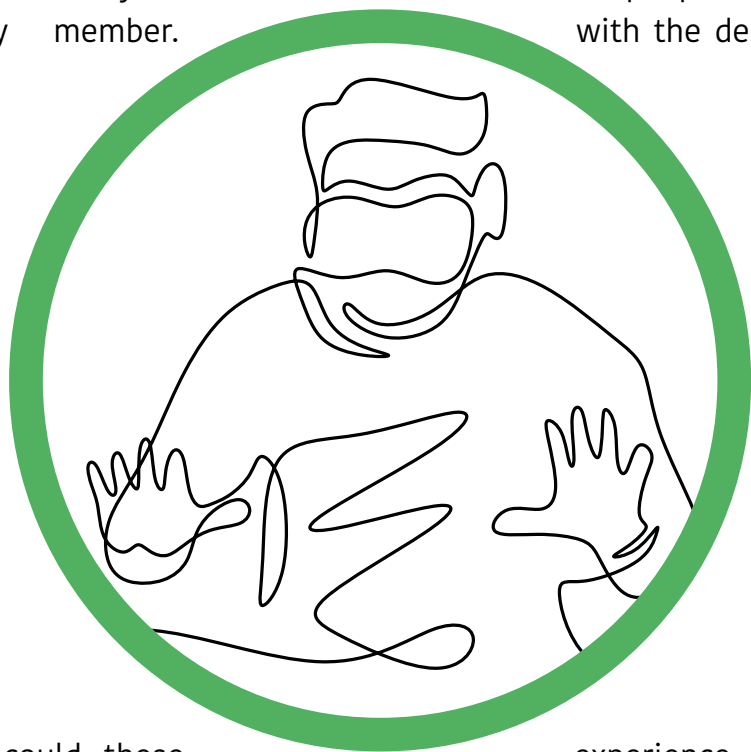
spread in the media is to use gaming technology (virtual reality goggles) in precisely this area of tension. The advantage here is that the digital environment can be easily adapted and changed, which is contrary to many challenges in the real environment.

To age in place being immobile means to stop travelling. A couple of German software developers would disagree. Especially during the pandemic, the isolation of older people became visible again. Some companies saw their (economic) responsibility to develop smarter solutions. An older technology, currently making a comeback in the gaming industry, is supposed to provide a remedy. With VR goggles, older people are to be sent on virtual journeys and adventures escaping the four walls of their residential care home.

A year ago, Maximilian had the opportunity to experience how VR gaming feels first hand

at a friend's. He struggled at first, this was a whole new feeling of being immersed in an unknown and weird world. Thinking about his grandma or even his parents he could not connect the two parts together: virtual reality and a joyful experience by an older family member.

He met, digitally, with a game developer who was involved for a few years in a R&D project of Virtual Reality Games for older people, in cooperation with residential care homes. The developer described how a lot of thought had to be put in how older people engage with the designed



How could these experiences be made felt to people without gaming experience? How are the older users understood by the game designers? These were some of Maximilian's own questions.

experience. Testing was at the centre of the developing process, a crucial but not final phase the developer told. Starting with the assumption that older people have an aversion towards tech-

nology, that they don't like video games or that they are not able to play for a long time because of their physical fitness, in the test phases he experienced something different. The challenges that emerged connected back to the concepts of some games.

Being thought through by the game developers the idea of the game was not understood or picked up by the older users. In the game prejudices, thoughts, imaginaries and concepts are being contested, stretched, or rejected, particularly the designers' ideas of "how people function", in particular older bodies.

Since Maximilian did not have access to the very older users who tested those gadgets has forced some ethnographic jumps in time and space, trying to grapple similar experiences.

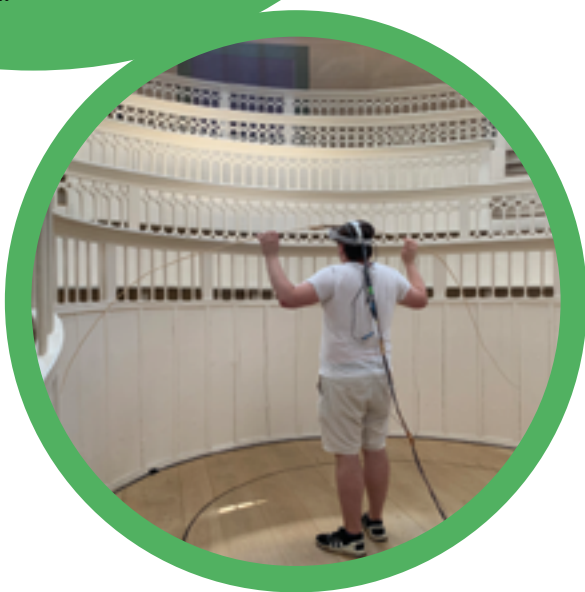
He was lucky to try the performative sound installation "Antenna" by Chloé Lee, Samu-

el Perea-Días and VanTa at the Stretching Senses School Festival. This experience got him thinking about how we function thrown into an unknown world, different but relating to our everyday experiences. This virtual experience made him wonder whether designers and developers understood older users not only as customers but as travellers or performers with their own agency.

The initial question of *what* kind of digital elements or designs were used in these experiences, shifted to *how* they are used. This has opened up two questions guiding his current explorations: How can the imaginaries of older bodies be seen through the assumptions inscribed in the virtual worlds which are allegedly easily to access? How could older people negotiate the inscriptions of ageing, written into the programme code, which might exclude them from virtual movement?

“Everything is dark. I am standing in the Tieranatomisches Theater. In the centre I see a black large tree stretching its branches over my head far into the room. I look around, moving my head, which feels heavy from the virtual reality headset I am wearing with two long antennas. Receiving an implus with object around me I see a flash of light brightining the virtual world. For a fraction of a second, I can make out the arches and outlines of the wall. It takes me some time to figure out that the strength of each impact of the sticks makes the flash of light brighter. The branches work as an antenna to orient in virtual space, building a bridge with the surroundings, two spaces overlapping each other. Without stretching out my senses towards both realities I would be lost or captured in one of them.“

Maximilian experiencing the Performative sound installation “Antenna” by Chloé Lee, Samuel Perea-Días and VanTa



## **Older people and mobilities in Bratislava: controversies in the context of history of transportation infrastructure [Adam]**

Movement is deeply inscribed in contemporary transportation infrastructures. Adam took a closer look at these scripts and how their development affects older citizens in Bratislava over time. In his work he has been searching to identify recent disputes and controversies.

Dating from the Middle Ages, many streets in Bratislava's old city centre were built with narrower standards. The socialist period brought roads built relatively wide for road motor vehicles with no infrastructure for other means of transportation, such as bicycles. After 1989 there has been a boom of cars, both in terms of ownership and usage, resulting in congestions and parking issues. At the same time, with the rise of civil society, bike activists began to demand, first, the building bike

paths and, later, their improvement. The narrowness of many streets has made this complicated. These configurations have led to various conflictual situations in how the roads, sidewalks and paths are supposed to be used.

Adam is especially interested in how older people in Bratislava move around and why, and how they might be affected by these infrastructures and their changes in doing so. The aim of his research is also understanding how they experience them in their daily life and how they could have a say in their transformation. He has become particularly interested in how the ways of moving inform certain reasonings in dispute of different actors.

An older man (in his mid 70s) that he met during a field visit, stated the following from a pedestrian point of view:

*"I find it problematic when sidewalks are used by cyclists. They usually pass 20 centimetres from*



*you at high speeds, being 20 centimetres away from breaking your hand.”*

er pedestrians and other users of transportation infrastructures.

A younger bike user (in his early 30s) and activist he also met in Bratislava referred a similar situation from a biker’s point of view:

*“I try to ride a bike on sidewalks only when it’s necessary. And if I use them, I do it slowly, as carefully as possible.”*

After asking him whether pedestrians complain when he bikes on sidewalks, he replied:

*“It happened to me once, it was an older man saying that sidewalks weren’t supposed to be used by cyclists.”*

A narrow sidewalk in Bratislava



This is just one of many examples he has been documenting, showing disputes between old-

## **Grey Panthers: A Retrospective [Anna]**

But public places are not the only urban space where age scripts can be contested. Anna's research on the Grey Panthers movement shows how homes can also be particular battlegrounds.

Back in the day, in the 1970s and 1980s, older people were usually attributed being "impotent, frail, disabled, demented, or dependent". The expectation was that they should disengage from society and never to appear in the public sphere. These ideas were a bedrock for welfare structures, and how they approached the housing and care of older people.

But from 1975 onwards, some of these ideas became a matter of contestation, after the foundation of the Senior-Protection-Association "Grey Panthers" in Wuppertal: a network of individuals and groups who tried to change society in order to improve late life. Its mem-

bers broke with dominant cultural expectations by showing up in places and taking actions that were "out of place".

The "Grey Panthers" not only made the older bodies visible in provocative manners. Above all they became crucial in contesting the age scripts of the, to them "untenable" processes and conditions of older people's care homes: older people who were found to be in need of care in the hospital, and who lived alone in their own dwelling were immediately placed by the authorities in a bed in the care home, proceeding to immediately dissolve their property. The savings of the person concerned were then taken in full to pay for the care home's rent. All people could keep, and they should be happy with that, was a personal picture of the deceased spouse or their children living away on the bedside table. Everything else was dissolved and disposed of by strangers.

The conditions in care homes were not particularly good: there was no interest in getting the person in need of care back on their feet, because that would lead to funding cuts. Paradoxically, the person in need of care would bring them much more money if the situation worsened. As a result, the “last dwelling in life” for those affected ended up being a bed in a collective room with a bedside table and a closet. That procedure prompted Trude Unruh, founder of the “Grey Panthers” to state:

*“Such a dwelling being the last place to stay in life is simply inhumane”.*

To counter this, they built their first shelter in Wuppertal, right after founding the association. If the “Grey Panthers” came to know of a case, members would turn up in the hospital, argued the person would be taken care of by good friends so they would be released. The shelter would be the first place

to move so that, with personal effort and physiotherapy, an attempt was made to get the person back on their feet, and thus grant them to return to their own home after a while. If that was not possible, a suitable care facility was found together with the concerned person, and their dwelling was only cleared in their presence following their instructions.

In her historiographical approach Anna is thus interested in how the “Grey Panthers” contested the social image of older people in the 1970s and 1980s, establishing itself as a movement. And mostly what the genealogy of their resistance says about Welfare state’s understandings of the ageing process.



Participation of the Federal Association of “Grey Panthers” at the seniors’ fair in Essen

Neighborhood festival of the Seniors Protection Association “Grey Panthers” in Göttingen



The logo of the “Grey Panthers”

**Becoming a Queer Pioneer: Intergenerational housing and spatial innovation at Lebensort Vielfalt am Südkreuz [Doreen]**

What forms of not-kin-related intergenerational relations might we learn from projects of queer ageing. Doreen's study has been following the attempts from a gay association - Schwulenberatung Berlin - to actively plan and implement alternative futures for old and young queer people. The initiators and residents of the housing project "Lebensort Vielfalt" have become innovators in creating a safe space for their community of interest with and despite the public administration.

As we mentioned in the introduction, housing is a well-known problem for older people in urban areas. The place of residence and the neighbourhood form the basic social framework, which in some cases has been built over several decades. Queer ageing people

are a collective particularly affected, as they are threatened by loneliness and segregation in several ways. Housing, care and the social network are therefore of immense importance when they grow older.

A central concern for Doreen's research has been how in the work of these initiators queer intergenerational futures become conceived and materialised. Inspired by STS approaches and their simultaneous attention to people and materials, she has examined how the yet unfinished intergenerational housing project "Lebensort Vielfalt am Südkreuz" partakes in a transformation of public space, granting visibility to older, queer people in the neighbourhood. This process has repeatedly made emerge boundaries that have had to be observed and acted upon: this range from how the very materials that can be chosen for the building limit the imagination to how the need for safety and security delineates newer pub-

lic and private spheres in the very zoning of the building.

Visiting the construction site in opening events has been a main part of her work so far. Doreen has followed visitors imagining their future while strolling around the naked rooms, barely covered in plaster board (Rigips), wandering over concrete and avoiding to step on construction material, as you can see in the pictures. In doing so, she has been listening to conversations and

vivid imaginations of living together. One person she met, an older man holding a walking stick, told her about his wish to live together with other gay men, also having children around, since his family doesn't talk to him anymore. This encounter showed another aspect of intergenerational housing for older people in urban areas: The transformation of family relations and filial obligations to care in Western societies dominated by ideas around kin.



Field visit: the construction site at the Open House at Südkreuz. A whole event for potential future residents and interested parties.

**Let's make it real!  
Queer Spatial Politics.  
Imaginations and Mate-  
rialisations of ageing  
otherwise [Christine]**

Another good example of how queer ageing projects attempt to reinvent intergenerational care beyond kin is Christine's research on a queer lesbian house project in Berlin-Mitte.



Christine has approached this housing project and their projections from a feminist perspective. The vast majority of institutions for older people consist of age-segregated care

facilities, subject to specific scripts and conceptions of ageing. In them, the lives of their residents are often circumscribed to heteronormative logics, and queer people and their perspectives often remain invisible when not unattended.

As we have seen when discussing the notion of the age script, the construction of categories of age is always linked to sociotechnical contexts; and, like other social categories such as gender, race, and ethnicity, it is produced through a variety of social relations, technologies, infrastructures, and discourses (Peine, Marshall, Martin, Neven 2021:7). As feminist works on ageing have shown life experiences as a member of a particular gender, racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic group shape the experience of ageing. Especially people with multiple discriminations can be strongly affected by isolation and discrimination. These include



members of sexual and gender minorities, who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (Witten 2012:2).

In this context Christine investigated queer-feminist urban practices of housing at the example of RuT-Wohnen, a project which emerged from the association RuT-Rad und Tat e.V. – Open Initiative of Lesbian Women, which has been working in Berlin since the 1990s for the interests of lesbian women, older women and women with disabilities. Particular attention has been put on how this project and the women in it are projecting an intergenerational queer housing future in Berlin, searching to become a role model for other similar projects.

During the research and in conversations with women engaged in the project, these women told stories about how they don't see themselves fitting into the "classic notions"

of ageing and projections of living an age-segregated life. A quote from one conversation illustrates this.

*"Just because I'm getting older doesn't mean I don't want to meet new people or learn new things or fall in love."*

These projections are not to be understood as mere ideas. These narratives partake in attempts at materialising other possibilities, engaging with existing ones as much as resisting them. As some images from the research process illustrate here, these feminist projections materialise in events, posters, the staking out of building sites, in blueprints of the house, which are oriented towards concrete proposals about how living together in the house should be organized. Altogether, these practices serve to make the future tangible and formulate subject positions and spatial claims in the city of Berlin. As Michelle Murphy puts it:

*“feminist projects themselves are assemblages of words, subject positions, objects, and practices each made and not given” (Murphy 2012:9).*

At the same time, the materializations also reveal conflicts that RuT Wohnen must negotiate, given its status as a civil-public model project. Due to the specific configuration of the cooperation with the Wohnungsbaugesellschaft Berlin-Mitte and the funding given by the Senate, regulations and requirements must be observed. For example, the project is confronted with the requirements of an increasing professionalisation, which relates to financial conflicts, since expert knowledge must be purchased.

As can be seen, the process of materialisation of these intergenerational futures is a fragile process; materiality does

not always correspond to one's own expectations. While the project received the building permit after a long struggle last year, there is a long road ahead for the women of RuT towards the still uncertain move-in and the materialisation of their intergenerational house project.



Spatial intervention: Staking out the floor plan at the solidarity event “Berlin braucht queer” organised by the RuT housing project.

**Generation gardens:  
A model for intergenerational dialog  
[Erman]**

When was the last time you had the opportunity to meet a person from another generation? Where did that happen other than at regulated spaces, educational institutions, work or your family? Where is this place?

In his search for this place of encounter, Erman went to the intercultural generational garden in Blohmstraße. In his first approaches he focused on the structure of the garden community and tried to understand people's roles within the community. It was the very name of the garden and its mandate that made this space so interesting for a research project. A space on the southern edge of Berlin, which, according to the garden manager's description, has been

*“offering space for active togetherness and joint leisure activities for young and old“.*

Beyond the possibilities of knowledge transfer, the relevance of the garden to articulate forms of environmental protection, autonomous living, urban gardening and kinship outside the family are some of the aspects that motivated Erman's interest in doing research there. The guiding question being: What do the users of the garden understand by an active, intergenerational coexistence and how does this affect the design of the garden?

Most of the older users see the garden as an opportunity to spend their free time. They want to create a space where conversation can take place, something they lack in their lives outside the garden. Those who have been there since the beginning are also the oldest. Hospitality plays an important role: for instance, the vegetables grown there should be prepared, whenever possible, together at the large table with the younger ones. They also like to criticise those who do

not maintain their plot correctly or only come to the garden sporadically. There may also be sanctions, which are discussed in the monthly meeting. The self-built garden house serves both as a meeting place and as a social centre.

It was interesting for Erman to observe that the younger families of the garden reported almost unanimously on the aspect of knowledge transfer:

*“We don’t just come so that our children can play here and we plant a few plants. We enjoy the opportunity for the older ones in the garden to help and advise us at all times and pass on knowledge that we would otherwise only have experienced on the Internet.”*

Intergenerational cooperation seems to work here with the help of role distributions, with the older ones acting as the voice of experience and the younger ones representing the future of the garden.

But what futures for what kind intergenerational relations seems to be a field of tension? It will remain exciting to see how the challenges of coexistence between the generations will develop in such an intercultural environment. Generation gardens are definitely an interesting concept on the way to achieving this goal.



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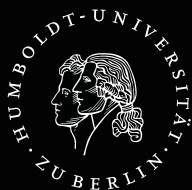
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How are cities and urban designers responding to the challenge of population ageing? How can we as ethnographers understand the social and material transformations underway in their efforts to shape “ageing-friendly” cities or cities “for all ages”? These are two of the leading research questions of our ethnographic study project “Ageing Cities” (M.A. in Ethnography, Humboldt-University of Berlin), on which we worked together in the academic year 2021-2022. Our main concern has been to explore the distinctive inter-generational design challenges of what some architects and urban planners are beginning to call “Late Life Urbanism”. Here you can read and see what we have learned.



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