

How to work in socially disadvantage large housing estates in Sweden

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to increase knowledge of strategic operating work methods in socially disadvantage large housing estates. The primary issue is to describe one housing company's countermeasures in order to stabilize a run-down neighbourhood and create possible conditions for profitability. Based on a detailed case study material from a socially disadvantage area in Malmö, daily work methods and the changing process are discussed and analyzed. Further detailed research will be carried out to decide the economic profitability of these countermeasures. The value of the study from a practical perspective is a deeper knowledge of difficulties and possibilities to stabilize socially disadvantage housing areas and to find sustainable work methods. From a research perspective it gives information that can be used for studies on comparative management studies.

Key words; Large housing estate, socially disadvantage, strategy, Sweden.

1 Introduction

1.1 General background

Housing standards and living conditions were bad in Sweden in the beginning of the 20th century. The urbanization led to problems with housing shortage, without improvements of infrastructure. City lives were in many ways characterized by misery, health problems and issues with overcrowded buildings. The Swedish government decided; in the middle of 1940's, that every single municipality should own their own housing company. This new idea was later described as a type of public housing, creating social values by providing better housing conditions to affordable costs to all kind of social groups (Ramberg 2000).

Large housing estate areas were from the beginning inhabited by Swedish working class people, followed by work immigrants and refugees. Some of these estates are today popular and are working well. But with some areas, you find significant social problems and segregated areas in bad condition. These neighborhoods have a large number of low-income households, unemployment rates are above average and they have become concentrated areas for ethnic minorities (Andersson 2002). The same patterned has emerged all over the Western Europe (Van Beckhoven 2006).

In Malmö, Sweden the area Herrgården has become a prime example of a non-functioning large scale neighbourhood. Herrgården, described as the worst part of the more famous district called Rosengård, a typical million dwelling program area produced in the end of 1960s. The general picture is major social problems, poverty and a deteriorated physical environment reflected in bad school performance, poor health, riots, fires and a high crime rates. In extreme cases parallels can be drawn to the general housing standards in the Swedish cities back in the 1920s with problems of overcrowding, bad health and social deprivation (Nordström 1984, Ramberg 2000). One of Herrgården's characteristics is the multi-cultural mix with residents from many parts of the world. Of the entire population 98 percent are of foreign origin, 50 percent are under 18 years, only 16 percent of the adult population has a post-secondary education and the unemployment rate is 87 percent. Herrgården is one of Sweden's most overcrowded neighbourhoods with 1360 rental dwellings, and 4878 documented people living there (Malmö City Office 2008). Recent calculations by police and social workers estimated that up to 9 000 people could be accommodated in the neighbourhood.

1.2 Research problem

Herrgården is divided among several private property owners and a large proportion of the properties have changed ownership several times over the last 15 years. This situation has adversely affected the neighbourhood with an absence of sustainable efforts over time. Malmö municipality has been concerned about the situation and let the municipal housing company acquire 6 properties in 2006 with 300 dwellings. Market value was set at 122 million Swedish crowns (12.2 million €), which many considered being too high based on the lack of maintenance and the neighbourhoods' social situation. The objectives with buying the property were to try to change the run down neighborhood and motivate other private property owners to renew their buildings, improve maintenance and housing administration. A total of 57 million Swedish crowns (5.7 million €) were invested on improvements' to increase the housing area's quality (1 million €) and decrease the lack of maintenance (4.7

million €). Other costs including the local administration are not included in these figures. Much can be done to improve this neighborhoods social- and physical condition. There are several reasons behind today's situation and many questions have to be answered about how to solve problems effectively and how to clarify responsibilities.

- This paper describes briefly a functioning neighbourhood's journey towards slum and discusses how a municipal housing company can manage to turn around this situation.
- I also discuss tenants' views, strategic approach and give practical examples of appropriate methods to start and continue a sustainable renewal process.

1.3 Research methodology

The empirical data used in this study is based on a detailed three year case study in one of Swedens (Malmö) most deteriorated neighborhoods. The research project started as a project documenting MKB fastighets AB, Malmo's municipality housing company's renewal process in Herrgården. A documentation material has been collected by passively participating in the change process the first year, and then returning with monthly visits and interviews with staff and tenants the following years. This interviews where continuously made with local staff and management and were organized as open discussions. The housing company did three home visits to every single household in a period of three years and 40 interviews with tenants were conducted simultaneously with the housing company's organized home visits in order to find out the tenants' views on important change parameters and what they think about the renewal process. The home visits in the research project took everything from 30- up to 90 minutes and represents 11 percent of all the 300 households and varied demographically and size in order to get an overall fair picture. The communication worked well and linguistic misunderstanding was rarely a problem and in some cases solved by other tenants involved as translators. The housing company did however use multi-lingual staff sometimes and they confirmed that in general the same views were reflected in the housing company's own remaining home visits and continuous discussions with the tenants.

1.4 Structure of article

The article is divided into five sections. In next section renewal work in large housing estates in Sweden is described. Section 3 presents the tenants' views and the housing company's approach. Section 4 contains reflections and analysis. Conclusion and recommendations can be found in the final section.

2 Renewal work in large housing estates in Sweden

Over the years there have been several attempts to solve problems in the large housing estates produced in the million dwelling program between 1965-1975, such as building improvements and social countermeasures. One example is the turn around projects back in the 1980s in Sweden, which in many ways resemble other projects around Western Europe. The Swedish government gave subsidies to municipal housing companies for renovation and rebuilding in socially disadvantaged areas. Of course this led to improved housing quality in some aspects, although it was a lack of local participation, and the cost was clearly higher

than the economic and social outcome (Johansson et al 1988; Carlén and Cars 1990; Jensfelt 1991; Johansson 1992; Ytterberg 1992; Ericsson 1993). The idea behind these turn around projects was to rapidly increase the attractiveness and attract more resourceful households. One social side effect was that unwanted household instead moved to other parts of the city transferring the problems to other neighbourhoods (Öresjö 1996).

The international recession in the early 1990s also hit the Swedish economy affecting the housing market in a negative way. These negative effects were particularly explicit in the large housing estates and led to increased unemployment, social exclusion and high vacancies. During those years many of these large housing estates neighbourhood as Herrgården had received many new immigrants and they did not enter the labour market. The result was increased poverty and crime, and this led to further deterioration. In the second half of 1990s unemployment decreased which again changed the situation on the housing market to a shortage of housing in Swedish large housing metropolitan areas. This is also the case for areas characterized as disadvantage neighbourhoods (Andersson et. al. 2003), but there are significant socioeconomic, culture and demographic differences between households leaving in large housing estates and those living in housing cooperatives or in single-family houses (Andersson et. al. 2003).

Back in the 1990s there still was an opportunity for housing companies to get governmental subsidies for renewal projects in large housing estate areas. In the socially weak neighbourhoods in Stockholm that received governmental subsidies the primarily focus was on improving education, the built environment and peoples feeling of security. The goal was to involve key actors and particularly tenants, but the participation was not very representative which reminded of the 1980s turn around projects. Some explanation could be found in language difficulties and the methods the housing companies used (Öresjö et. al. 2004). Identifying and selecting a poor neighbourhood may also lead to further stigmatization e.g. that the neighbourhood is not treated as a normal area. Experiences show that projects that are carried out during a limited time are not likely to be successful because of distrust from the residents and the lack of long term perspectives (Öresjö et. al. 2004). The renewal projects and the governmental subsidies in Sweden led to a political debate about that a municipal housing company “must” manage renewal of socially weak neighbourhood by making sustainable economic investments. This is also one of the explanations why the government today do not have any subsidies for this type of projects, even though it is now under discussion again.

Employment seemed to be the most important parameter to improve living condition, the individual household’s economic situation but also resulting in better access to the Swedish society in general. An obvious conflict however is when unemployment rates dropped, it might result in out-migration. This of course could be a success for an individual but not necessary for the large housing estates when better economic households leave and new weak households moves in stigmatising the social economic situation further. An interesting result is that regardless of which large housing estates in Sweden one look at, the majority of tenants seemed to be rather satisfied with their neighbourhood, although there is a common demand for improved security, playgrounds for children, higher quality of schools, maintenance of buildings and public and commercial services (Andersson et. al. 2005).

3 Residents opinion and the housing company's approach

After the municipal housing company acquired the 6 properties with 300 dwellings in Herrgården, they made a detailed examination of the properties. The properties needed a complete renovation and the outdoor environment was in very poor condition. These properties have changed private ownership several times since the beginning of 1990s, and none of these owners had invested enough resources to maintain a good quality level. When Herrgården was built in the late 1960s and back at that time it was considered to be the best part of Rosengård. However, economic crisis in the beginning of 1990s affected the neighbourhood with socially stronger households moving out and an increasing share of poor households and immigrants. Subsequently, the neighbourhood was more and more associated with segregation, exclusion, drugs and crime.

To change this negative spiral the municipal housing company initially created a strong local administration consisting of 6 persons who were handpicked and organized at a local office. At first the staff needed to build up confidence, commitment and get tenants to participate actively in the process of change. The tenants were sceptical after years of poor management and various problems. An important step for the housing company was to meet all tenants and to do home visits in order to gain knowledge of the individual needs and to start up a new trustful relationship. Home visits were primarily an opportunity to build up the relationship and secondly an information exchanges between the housing company's staff and the tenants.

3.1 Residents' Opinion

As a researcher I participated in 40 home visits and it was interesting to get an insight into the everyday life in a socially disadvantage large housing estate characterized in Sweden as slum. It was obvious that the tenants appreciated these meetings and that the housing company's staff showed interest in their life. The picture of overcrowding and alienation was confirmed. These people were isolated in a large housing estate, without any contacts or inputs into the Swedish society.

The tenants had many ideas about how housing quality could be improved and this was summarized and organized in eight different components, including both social and physical countermeasures ranked according to how often these measures were mentioned by the tenants in the interviews.

Table 1: Tenants ideas about how to increase housing quality

38 (95%) wanted to improve security in common- and private areas. The tenants spoke about problems with unauthorized people entering the properties, burglary in apartments, store rooms and cars. Some also felt insecure to stay in the basement, garages and outdoor environment. "I never go down myself in the basement and avoid being out late at nights" (quoted from tenant). Both the garage and the storage rooms were particularly affected, poor lighting and poorly managed outdoor environments were documented.

34 (85%) required improved outdoor environment and playgrounds for the children. Over 50 percent of residents are under 18 years and it was not particularly surprising that the parents saw a great need to increase opportunities for children activities. Even the children confirmed

that in the interviews. “We have not much to do when we come home after school and there are no fun things outside the courtyard” (quoted from tenant’s child).

Table 1: Tenants ideas about how to increase housing quality

Physical measures		Social measures	
Improve security in common- and private areas	38 (95%)	Clear housing company rules and improve handling of disturbances	30 (75%)
Improve outdoor environment and playgrounds	34 (85%)	Activities for children and young people	26 (65%)
Improve handling of fault reports and apartment condition	30 (74%)	Reduce anonymity and increase security	18 (45%)
Improve cleaning	22 (55%)		
Solve vermin problems	16 (40%)		

30 (74%) wanted improved handling of fault reports and apartment condition. Former property owners have had a very low service level and seldom returned to the tenants to take care of upcoming problems. Home visits showed a low level of housing quality and problems with moisture damage in bathrooms. “We stopped reporting faults long time ago since the staff continuously ignored us before. Now it feels like the new property owner cares about us” (quoted from tenant). Although a few apartments renovations were started by the earlier property owner, there where only a few completed, which have to be very frustrating for the tenants who were forced to live in a mess for a long time. Tenants' confidence in the staff has recovered to a certain extent after the municipal housing company becomes the new owner of the properties. Today the tenants do contact the housing company when they need it which they apparently avoided earlier.

22 (55%) required improved cleaning of stairways, basements, garages and courtyards. Bad smell and dirty common spaces, garbage problems and abandoned car wrecks were not unusual and many tenants experienced this as very negative. “It smells bad in elevators, there is graffiti on the walls and garbage is thrown all over the place” (quoted from tenant). Some of this could be explained by the earlier housing companies poor cleaning and a non-functioning waste treatment, but also by the residents’ bad behaviour and poor responsibility. 16 (40%) wanted to solve vermin problems. These problems affected not all the tenants but still proved to be a fairly common problem and depended on residents' lifestyles as well as the previous owner’s lack of effective countermeasures. “We have cockroach and other types of bugs in my apartment and some of our neighbours have the same problem” (quoted from tenant). Reduced cost of the waste-treatment and cleaning are evidence that measures have been effective in this area. The tenants have overall a pretty coherent picture of the physical needs but there were also social problems that needed to be tackled.

30 (75%) required clear housing company rules and improved handling of disturbances. A lot of the tenants experienced disruptions at evenings and nights. A common problem was high noise levels during nights when “normal” people sleep, due to that a majority of the tenants are unemployed. The tenants’ thinks rules should be followed and prefer the housing

company to handle different disturbances effective. “It is difficult to sleep because the people go to bed very late here and sleep until afternoon the next day” (quoted from tenant).

26 (65%) wanted more activities for children and young people. These two groups are over-represented demographic category and bad maintained playgrounds and lack of facilities in the outdoor environment seemed to affect these two groups more than other groups. Young people e.g. disturbed other tenants by hanging around and smoking in the stairwells in the absence of other places to be. However did this not disturb all the tenants, but experienced as a problem by some.

Fires are a frequent and recurring problem and according to several tenants, children and young people are behind them and as a tenant put it. “The children are bored and want something to happen”. Property owners have recurrent problems with fires and the fire department has been hit by stone-throwing children when they are working in Herrgården to put out the fires. This is an escalating phenomenon in Sweden and the large housing estates are particularly affected by this behaviour.

18 (45%) consider the anonymity to be a problem e.g. that the neighbours do not know or trust each other. “I do not know anyone here and I do not feel safe, and avoid going out at certain times” (quoted from tenant).

The housing companies experience from the home visits resulted in a working plan and the content of this is described in the next section.

3.2 The Housing company’s approach

Based on tenants' needs the work to fulfil basic requirements and to improve the general housing standards’ began. It proved to be a deep commitment among tenants who contributed with social activities in the neighbourhood. The work was structured by explicit frontline staff roles, working schedules and extended office hours. The working plan could be summarized in five different subject areas including the working strategies and practical measures:

Caretaking, property maintenance/ outdoor environment. tenant relation, information and social projects.

Caretaking: Starting from a zero-tolerance level, meaning that every fault should be corrected as soon as possible from the time the frontline staff discovered the fault or the tenant complained about it. The key was to directly remedy disturbances and general faults, and keep the indoor and outdoor environment completely dirt-free (no graffiti, no garbage and no bad smell) and clean the area often and whenever there was a need. The frontline staff did daily supervision of all space and increased accessibility for tenants, e.g. that staff are always available by phone during the daytime and that they could get help during nights. “It has been important to act quickly, involve tenants and children who participated in the daily local housing administration” (quoted from Manager). This has been a way to get tenants and children to take an active interest in their living environment and proved to have a positive effect on e.g. reduced vandalism.

Maintenance of the property and the outdoor environment: This incorporates all the physical planned measures to improve housing standards e.g. upgrading and refining of the courtyards, green areas, properties and renovations of individual apartments. Tenants were active in these

processes and participated in the decision-making to select materials, colours and design etc. All renovation has been in dialogue with the tenants and the frontline staff got feedback after the measures were implemented. An example of this is that tenants together with the staff inaugurated completed renovations and building projects. "Maintenance has been neglected for many years and it was important to listen to the tenants' requests, providing information and prioritize the most important measures" (quoted from manager). Herrgården's needs are extremely extensive and it takes a major financial investment to solve the most urgent problems.

Tenant relations: This represents a special focus on continuous home visits and appointments with tenants when faults are solved. The aim is to create a natural relationship based on trust, and thereby improve the contact between the housing company and the tenants. It has not been difficult, thanks to this work, to get tenants to participate in various social activities. "Mutual understanding has been important and that we as staff show that we are available for the tenants at whatever time they need us" (quoted from manager). A great work has been done on the home visits and 900 were implemented over a period of 3 years. Beside this, the ordinary management activities rolled on as usual.

Information: Aims to improve tenants' knowledge of the management function, rules and responsibilities' through information in stairways, newsletters and home visits. The housing company has also structured the working day and working out schedules for the frontline staff organizing different activities. The schedule includes, e.g. the morning round, office hours, solving fault reports, handling of invoices, order of contractors and social projects, etc. "We felt that we needed a clear structure, otherwise we had no idea where to start because there was so much to do. We also saw a great need to continue to inform tenants about tenants' obligations, but also on their rights and what expectations they could have on our service" (quoted from Manager). The housing company has as a result of these measures improved efficiency and increased transparency, thereby reducing the risk of different types of misunderstandings e.g. that the tenants do not have faith in the service and therefore not reporting faults.

Social projects: Social measures have been a fundamental strategy to create conditions for effective property management. It includes neighbourhood related activities, sponsorship and networking with e.g. community organizations, schools, private businesses, other property owners and non-profit organizations. One focus has been to reduce problems of overcrowding and inform various players about the neighbourhoods' needs. However, a particular focus was to create activities for children and young people. "We have seen that these groups are large and are responsible for much of the neighbourhood's trouble" (quoted from Manager). The staff focus on both disturbances and problems with vandalism. Some examples of these prevention activities to reduce troubles are children helping frontline staff with outdoor environments maintenance, planted flowers, designed arts and that they participated in a decision making process when two new courtyards and playgrounds were designed. Unfortunately, it appeared that it was difficult to motivate and involve young people in this renewal process. However, experience shows that summer jobs and cooperation's with role models from e.g. subcultures has brought the frontline staff closer to the young people which increase the chance of mutual understanding and provide opportunities to work efficiently without a lot of problems. "An important objective in our social measures is to continue the neighbourhoods' progress and that negative developments in nearby residential areas should not influence on our tenants" (quoted from Manager).

4 Reflections and analysis

While the main focus in this paper is on the strategic and practical methods of the housing company to create conditions for effective property management you can not ignore the overall issue why this neighbourhood becomes a slum area. In earlier studies you will find several explanations for Herrgården's negative development, beginning with a huge immigration coinciding with the economic crisis back in the 1990s that led to high unemployment and concentration of refugees, weak economic households and exclusion in the large housing estates in Sweden (Andersson 2002, Andersson et. al. 2003). It is also likely that landlord's business perspective plays a large role in how these properties are allowed to degenerate and how much money that is reinvested in maintenance etc. Since the early 1990s, there have been three different private owners in these properties. A short run profit perspective is no dream scenario for this type of neighbourhood that requires a more serious proactive and progressive owner to create conditions for good housing quality and profitability.

In comparison with the large scale renewal projects back in the 1980s and 1990s there is an important lesson to learn from the housing company's work in Herrgården. As mentioned earlier have previous large housing estates renewal projects in Sweden not succeeded very well in view of the outcome in relation to how much money that was invested. What have failed in these projects is usually related to the methods used and the lack of tenant participation (Johansson et al 1988; Carlén and Cars 1990; Jensfelt 1991; Johansson 1992; Ytterberg 1992; Ericsson 1993; Öresjö et. al. 2004). The housing company's work in Herrgården was very methodological and the management created a strong local organization with hand-picked staff. This has been tested earlier, but unlike previous renewal projects the tenants were in this case playing a more active part in different activities.

The housing company conducted 900 home visits over a period of 3 years which provided both parties with important information. At the same time, it has created a mutual understanding e. g. that the housing company improved the service and that the tenants better fulfilled their obligations. The result speaks for itself and both tenants and staff emphasize that it is far less problems with vandalism and disturbances today, three years after the municipal housing company took over from the private owner. Continuous feedback from tenants has provided the management with important information, but has also become an opportunity for the housing company to inform tenants about the rules and what's going on and what has been achieved. Although the process sometimes was very slow, feedback has motivated staff to continue working, but has also been a major reason why so many tenants have been mobilized and participated actively in the renewal process.

It is important to have a consistent policy in the company to get Herrgården to continue to be developed. The risk is otherwise that the neighbourhood falls back into the old footprints when the housing company is not actively working and maintains the properties. Housing companies that are investing in service, housing quality, social projects and maintenance increases the opportunities for tenants to remain in the large housing estates even if the housing market is changing and the household's financial position is strengthened. The development also depends on that private property owners nearby make necessary investments to avoid that problems are spread between different residential areas. The empirical material created a picture of the tenants' view of important physical and social measures to change the neighbourhoods' negative progress.

The focus was a fundamental need of security and safety and to improve security in common- and private areas and many required clear housing company rules and improved handling of disturbances. This was hardly surprising; however, that the tenants requested clear rules and improved handling of disturbances was somewhat surprising since residents in areas like this usually do not have high confidence in the authorities. The tenants thought it was important to improve outdoor environment and playgrounds which is also associated with the tenants' desire for more activities for children and young people. Although there are big differences "on paper" between people in Herrgården is there probably no subject that is connecting the tenants more than children and young people and they would gladly participate in working to improve activities which also generates much goodwill for the housing company and ultimately facilitates the handling of difficult issues e.g. follow up disturbances and vandalism etc. Invested money in the outdoor environment back in the 1980s and 1990s have showed to have beneficial effects and is also something that is connecting tenants as well as the tenants and the housing company. Reducing anonymity was another measure that the tenants wanted and this is associated with creating conditions for meetings in the outdoor environment and arranging social projects. This is not especially odd considering how high safety and security ended up on the agenda.

Improved handling of fault reports and apartment condition is an issue that also is linked to the tenants desire to improve cleaning which summarizes the tenants' demands for better service. An effective housing management is dependent on the housing company's ability to deliver fast and better service and it helps to strengthen tenants' trust on the housing company's service which affects their behaviour in various issues e.g. that tenants quickly report faults and, as mentioned before, that the company fulfils their obligations. The last issue drew the attention was associated with concerns to solve vermin problems, which proved to be very uncomfortable for the tenants. While this is related to housing the company's service, it is not entirely fair to just blame the property owner because the tenants are highly involved with e.g. their habits. However, you can understand the stress and sanitary inconvenience it is for an affected tenant, which should motivate property owners to take measures to provide lasting effects.

As important as the existence of a consistent housing company policy are an improved social and economic situation for the households. Even if the housing company is working actively to change Herrgården's situation, they become very dependent on changes in the labour market and migration policies etc. A more and more common thing in Sweden is that in disadvantage large housing estates the housing companies are forced to take a greater responsibility for social action on the grounds that the municipality or other players are not sufficiently active. This is obviously not just for a good cause but associated to the housing company's desire to pursue an effective management e.g. to collect rents and to avoid various problems that can be very costly for the company in the future.

The Housing Company's investments in Herrgården has been very extensive and it needs a strong owner with a long-term strategy to be possible to implement because there are no longer any government subsidies for this type of projects. Municipal housing companies are not alone in the large housing estates neighbourhoods in Sweden. There are also many private housing companies represented by different owners' policies to determining which investments may be possible from a profitability perspective. Can we expect that the housing companies always will have social projects and are these profitable or should other players be the driving force? There are many questions that need to be more deeply further discussed,

and the next step in the project is to make economics calculations about the costs and benefits for the company from making investments of the kind described above.

5 Conclusions

Methods of how to work in socially disadvantage large housing estates can be discussed in more general terms from five different perspectives.

1. The need to mobilise the tenants.
2. The need of social projects.
3. The need to improve property service.
4. The need to improve the outdoor and build environment.
5. The need that measures are profitable from a business economic perspective.

These different statements are mutually linked to each other and depending on whether the housing company's work will be successful or not. Besides these is it important to get information about the specific situation by committing home visits and to organize staff local at the neighbourhood. It is an advantage if staff could be hand-picked and have a great responsibility to be active in the neighbourhoods' progress, which also is related to the incentive systems within the company. Involving tenants in the changing process have an impact on decreased anonymity and increased mutual understanding between residents and the tenants and the housing company staff. Using different types of social project mainly focuses on children and young people reduced problems with disturbances and vandalism. Improved property service and outdoor and build environment resulted in a more efficient management e.g. that the tenants instead of making trouble becomes the housing company extended arm.

A fundamental key factor to succeed with a renewal process is a consistent housing company policy. This means that the local administration continues to involve tenants and work actively with social projects, maintenance and service with no time limit based on current needs. A socially disadvantaged large housing estates could easily fall back into old footprints and turn into a slum again. Herrgården as an investment "project" needs to be acceptable from a profitability perspective, since there are no longer governmental subsidies in Sweden. Today, both private and municipal housing companies are represented in this type of neighbourhoods and it is not inconceivable that different owners directive affect the company's consistent policy and what investments that in general can be implemented.

An interesting question is whether a private company working with a long-run perspective will do the same things as a municipal housing company, and what really is profitable and what needs to be subsidized in one way or another in order to be carried out. These questions will be in focus in the coming parts of the research project reported here.

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