Learning to Unlearn: Transformative Education in the City

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Introduction: Urban Immersion

While urban settlements have been an integral part of human life for millennia, cities today are arguably at the heart of survival on, and of, this planet. More than half of the world's population now lives in cities, and urban centers present some of the greatest social and environmental challenges of our time (UN HABITAT 2008). Though students may study in or travel through cities while learning abroad, urban settings typically provide the scenery rather than the focus for study abroad programs. The International Honors Program (IHP), in contrast, studies the urban context itself and embraces the consequential role of cities in the world as the thematic heart of our study abroad program, Cities in the 21st Century. In this article, we discuss the content and the learning opportunities that are available when the city is the classroom. We describe the current design of the program and methods that we use, and suggest how the intercultural context and interdisciplinary nature of this experience can be adapted to other programs in international education.

Most U.S. students have limited knowledge of cities and urban life outside of the United States. Studying globalization in university courses, students may read Mike Davis's Planet of Slums (2006) or Teresa Caldeira's City of Walls (2000) to learn about increasing inequity manifested in slums and gated communities. But just as likely their information consists of dramatic snapshots. They may have glimpsed urban India in Slumdog Millionaire or

heard in the news about a city in China devoted to sock-making. There may be passing recognition that major sports events take place in cities, such as Beijing's 2008 Olympics or Cape Town's 2010 World Cup. Through these snapshots, a single dimension stands to represent a dynamic, multifaceted, and intricately connected human settlement.

The IHP Cities in the 21st Century program (IHP Cities) aims to expose students to the richness and complexity of life in cities. Cities are centers of individual opportunity and civic engagement and also sites of socio-economic disparity and political inequality. For some a city provides remarkable luxury and for others unbelievable deprivation. Beyond the extremes, however, cities offer diverse prospects for most inhabitants, able to provide opportunities for work, education, and artistic expression. This dense concentration of resources is the very aspect of cities that creates the opportunity for learning.

IHP Cities is a thematic, comparative program in which students examine the issues of 21st century life in the U.S. and abroad by studying people, planning, and politics in specific cities. Since the program began in 1999, it has begun with an orientation in a United States city, followed by travel to cities in three countries over the course of a semester. The strategy is to provide a structured, comparative analysis of similarities and differences of urbanism in diverse places. The group, consisting of 30 to 35 students and four faculty, including a Fellow, spends approximately two weeks in a city in the United States, followed by four to five weeks in three other countries, one city each in Africa, Asia and South America.

The purpose of study abroad is for students to learn other ways of living in and understanding the world, usually through a process of immersion. Most study abroad programs focus on cultural immersion characterized by learning a language and living in one place for a semester or two. The IHP Cities program aspires to urban immersion, teaching students how to read a city by gaining an understanding of the systems and rhythms of cities that make them productive for large numbers of people.

Study abroad is well known for being a transforming experience for students. Studying the city has the power to make that transformation both personal and societal, as students examine how everyday lives, including their own, are affected by the forces, systems and circumstances of cities. Our objective in the IHP Cities program is for students to get at the heart of how cities work, and thus how these students, in their personal and professional

lives, can influence the future of cities.

The City as the Classroom

The fundamental tenet of the IHP Cities program is that the city is the classroom. This means that every aspect of living in a city is a potential source of learning. For example, students must ride the local transportation in order to observe, experience, and reflect on how it works for city residents and visitors. The history of a neighborhood is learned through conversations with shop owners. By carrying out transactions in the local currency and exploring local lunch spots, students compare the extent of purchasing power in different cities. Adjusting to host families means learning about struggles, celebrations, and the mundane practices of everyday life in very different urban contexts. The goal is to begin to understand how people make cities meaningful and how cities work, that is to say, how systems of transportation or housing or inequity are produced, contested, and lived on a daily basis.

When the city becomes the classroom, students must shift their expectations of what constitutes experts and expertise. The Cities program is designed to transfer the source of knowledge to the actors and institutions of the city where sources for learning are abundant and contradictory. To do so, students must unlearn their expectations for the learning process itself. Learning to unlearn means setting aside and questioning one's assumptions and preconceived notions about how to learn, in order to hear, see and experience the city on other people's terms. The framework for expertise shifts from faculty and books to host families, government planners, urban recyclers, shopkeepers, developers, and a broad array of people with a range of extraordinary and ordinary experiences and views on their city. The terms for learning, therefore, depend on the styles, sites and circumstances in which students encounter these teachers as well as students' willingness to discover the potential for learning in every situation.

Learning on other people's terms sounds simple, but it is difficult to practice and to teach. For undergraduates whose previous experiences are shaped by professional educators, learning to value local knowledge can be a daunting process. From the first day in the IHP Cities program, students are asked to abandon their expectations of familiarity. From the lengthy eight-hour day, the highly structured program, the nonlinear flow of information, and the unpredictable and dynamic range of voices, it is a challenge unlike the university environment. Our intention is for students to develop a

self-awareness and willingness to communicate with strangers, to change the tempo of interaction, to learn through sensory processes, and to relinquish their expectations for simple answers. In the process, they develop skills to move through the city attentive to the social and physical environment. All of these elements are part of learning on other people's terms.

Observation and recording, communication and analysis, group work: each of these skills and methods is present within the structure of a multi-city learning cycle that draws on traditional academic as well as experiential methodologies. Building on students' familiarity with traditional academic learning offers an important starting point for learning on other people's terms, and urban topics are typically introduced by local experts who are brought into a classroom setting. This introduction is followed by a field exercise which students undertake in small groups, and finally a report-back or discussion session facilitated by faculty. Drawing on experiential learning methodologies (Citron and Kline 2001; Kolb 1984; Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich 2002), the cycle of learning emphasizes a continual integration of experience, reflection, analysis, and synthesis.

The IHP Cities learning cycle is illustrated in the following example. Students are introduced to local policy on urban environmental management in Sao Paulo by a guest lecturer, for example a civil servant in the city's public works department or an academic from a local university. Then, through visiting a landfill and conversing with the manager or engineer at the site, students discover the significance of leachates and methane and hear about the effectiveness of sanitary landfills. They hear about the benefits of the facility to the larger community. While stopping in the neighboring town for lunch, students have an informal conversation with residents who discuss the problems they face living near a landfill, including polluting trucks and a contaminated water supply. They learn about thwarted efforts in this poor neighborhood to organize and protest the expansion of the landfill. Afterward, students discuss what they have learned through their observations, conversations, and reflections. Integrated into the discussion are daily observations of informal recyclers or scavenging practices seen in the city's streets as well as insights and prejudices gleaned from conversations with host families. A lesson on inequality is made meaningful, for example, by recognizing how marginalized people suffer the consequences of urban waste which is largely produced by prosperous urban residents. The discussion continues over the semester as

new knowledge is gained and applied through comparative assessment.

Through this learning cycle, urban waste, a topic of seemingly little relevance, becomes clearly connected to the perpetuation of social inequity and issues of social justice, urban policy and political turmoil, and environmental sustainability. Reading the city becomes not only a process of learning how systems work but of understanding how humans, as individuals and groups, act and react within and to those systems.

This design offers a learning environment where students encounter multiple sources of knowledge and conflicting truths, developing more questions than answers. Furthermore, focusing on specific issues like waste (or housing or transportation) is an empowering way for students to begin a conversation with a range of urban actors by communicating about topics that are generally accessible. By working with host institutions and organizations, the program is able to enter different urban communities, thus directly addressing specific urban issues people are facing. Repeated exposure to informal and formal learning opportunities helps teach students how to respectfully and productively bridge cultural and other differences to engage in conversation. In various ways, IHP creates an environment of intellectual opportunities that requires students to be interactive and self-directed in their learning.

There are a number of observation, communication, mapping, and analytical skills that we teach within the cycle of learning. Observation and recording while recognizing one's prejudices are seemingly simple tools, yet deceptively difficult in intercultural contexts. We have developed several exercises to improve these skills. In an anthropological exercise, students first observe and describe an urban scene, then examine how their interpretation compares to that of a local person, and finally consider the scene in broader analytical context. In a mapping assignment designed to develop an urban planning lens, students literally map the social and physical infrastructure in a city block. In an excursion with a multidisciplinary focus, groups of students walk along a familiar route to search for patterns and events that reveal the presence of the state, evidence of social roles, or the overlap of formal and informal economies. Students discover that observation involves all the senses, that it is an act of corporeal awareness as well as a process of meaning-making which requires communicating with the city's residents. Through communication with various urban actors, students begin to understand the

city from the perspectives of its diverse inhabitants. Akin to the qualitative methods used in ethnographic fieldwork (Robben and Sluka 2007), students observe and participate in the social world around them—confronting issues of cultural translation, cultural relativism, and their own positionality—in order to understand how people make sense of their urban worlds.

Using multiple modes of communication for reflection and analysis is a near-daily aspect of the program. Visual and oral modes supplement the more familiar written form of communication that is typically emphasized in university courses. The expectations are set up in the pre-departure assignment—a description and analysis of an issue of public debate from students' home or college city. In addition to preparing an essay describing and analyzing the situation, the assignment requires students to distill the main points into a poster presentation. The poster session is comprised of short oral presentations to a small group facilitated by the faculty and then summarized back to the larger group. Thus the concept that content and form together produce effective communication is introduced. Furthermore, presentations are required in every city in order to provide students the chance to develop and practice oral presentation skills. Through the semester, there are multiple opportunities to experiment with conventional and inventive modes of communication through presentation.

As students are requested to leave their computers at home, even writing papers becomes a new form of mental processing. Without the convenience of delete, cut and paste functions, or the ready resource of the internet, students work with the material at hand. "What is the information I have learned?" and "what does it mean?" become the leading questions, rather than "where is the information that I want?" Most students also develop a consciousness about their own process of thinking in the course of writing essays longhand. It may be in how they plan and execute the work, it may be in how they think through language. Usually it hones a skill that contributes positively to their writing when they (happily!) return to the computer.

Students work in small groups for discussion, research and presentations. Just as students must spend much of their time experiencing the city and learning on other people's terms, they must also come together, in an iterative process, to make sense of what they have experienced. On their own time, and in the structured environment of the courses and city program, students share their confusions, questions and insights. In the process, they

teach each other. This is particularly important since the IHP Cities program attracts students from universities across the U.S. and does not require students to have a background in urban studies. Students with backgrounds in politics and economics are encouraged, for example, to participate in explaining concepts like neoliberalism or development to classmates. We have watched students become empowered through the slow but powerful recognition that they have expertise to share, and that such expertise can come through interdisciplinary engagement.

Designing Programs to Challenge Preconceptions

In recognizing that students travel with "imaginative geographies" (Said 1979)—preconceptions of people and place—it is critical to design a program that helps students question their expectations of cities and urban life. Social scientists (Gans 1967; Hannerz 1980; Massey and Denton 1993; Portes and Jensen 1987; Simone 2009) examining neighborhoods and social networks in cities have demonstrated that people living in metropolitan areas typically develop relationships with others of similar social backgrounds. Students also tend to socialize and congregate in familiar places as they travel. The IHP Cities program is organized to ensure that students cross the social and physical boundaries of cities and relate those experiences to broader frameworks for analysis. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives, the structure of the program exposes students to the myriad ways that cities are organized and the distinctions between policy, plan and lived experience. They begin to understand how cities work differently for different people. To do this, the program incorporates two major design elements: course syllabi designed by "traveling faculty," who accompany the students for the duration of the program, and city programs designed by "local faculty," who live in the city. The program draws members of both groups from numerous disciplines, including Anthropology and Urban Planning as well as Economics and the Arts.

Each city program establishes a cycle of learning over a four (sometimes five) week period. This cycle repeats in form from city to city with place-specific content. City programs progress as follows: The first week quickly grounds students in the new city through a series of urban explorations and introductory lectures. Guest lecturers provide an introduction to social, political, economic, and planning contexts in the city and country,

while urban explorations expose students to the sounds and sights of city life. During the second week, the program activities expand on the development, social, and environmental issues that arise in each city, including housing, spatial divisions, waste, water, mega-projects, and transportation. The third week builds further on those themes, giving students several days to delve more deeply into specific topics of particular interest to them. Guided by faculty, students distill their findings and develop an appropriate mode for leading the larger group through their research, conclusions, and next set of questions. The fourth week is an opportunity for reflection, comparative analysis, and consideration of the particular city in the global context. At the conclusion of the term, the students spend a week reflecting on the personal and academic learning of the semester, culminating in a public presentation.

Layered onto the city programs are four courses conducted by the traveling faculty that offer theoretical and methodological tools grounded in academic disciplines. The IHP Cities program examines a city through several lenses: Urban Politics and Development, Culture and Society of World Cities, Urban Planning and Sustainable Environments, and Contemporary Urban Issues. Faculty design course syllabi around the core concepts and methods of their disciplines, and teach the material by applying it to city-specific contexts. Required and recommended readings are drawn, whenever possible, from local academics and based in location-specific examples. Assignments emphasize learning from the primary sources of the city, and courses often overlap in order to emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of the investigation. Faculty members reinforce their role as facilitators and resources by constantly responding to the unscripted learning that comes from observing, experiencing, and interpreting the city. As they teach in this way, they subvert the very idea of an academician, an expert who knows the answers, by focusing on the voices of urban residents and on the understanding produced by students themselves.

Local and traveling faculty together structure the learning environment for students and participate in the learning process. At each stage, the teaching team is working with the students to construct the platform that supports the experiential learning cycle as students reflect on their experiences, conceptualize them, and apply them to the next phase of learning. Local faculty provide depth and insight into each country to facilitate analysis and interpretation. Traveling faculty break down disciplinary silos and help students

develop a holistic and interrelated understanding of cities across a semester.

As anyone who has coordinated a study abroad semester knows, programs do not always work out as smoothly as we would wish; however, even difficulties can produce occasions for developing greater understanding. We often find ourselves creating learning opportunities in unpredictable and difficult circumstances, such as during public strikes or when the public bus breaks down, not infrequent experiences in many world cities. When the city becomes the classroom, faculty must consider how to respond with flexibility and creativity to urban issues as well as to students' concerns. With city programs and course syllabi dependent on numerous moving parts, facilitating learning often means encouraging students to actively and self-critically engage with whomever they are interacting, wherever they are in the city. Students become active participants in, rather than consumers of, their education. In the process, students' preconceptions about other people and places are challenged and begin to shift.

Comparative Study Within and Across Cities

The IHP Cities program is designed to take advantage of the understandings that grow from making different types of comparisons. On the one hand, intercultural comparisons are made from personal immersion, informed and interpreted by observations through the eyes and words of others, and layered with the lenses of the academic disciplines. On the other hand, comparisons are also made across spatial and urban contexts.

The process of making comparisons begins when students meet for the orientation launch in the United States. Our selection and exploration of a U.S. city is based on the intention of immediately taking students outside of familiar zones, and relating their experiences to broader analytical questions.

Two orientation cities, New York City and Detroit, launch the Spring and Fall programs respectively. Seeming opposites, New York, characterized as a global city (Sassen 1991), and Detroit, characterized as a shrinking city (Shrinking Cities 2004), each defy students' preconceived notions. Some students live in New York, many have visited as tourists with their families, but few have tried on a fur coat while learning about local commerce from a shopkeeper in the Russian enclave of Brighton Beach, or have understood transnational remittances by visiting Alianza Dominicana, a community-

based organization in Washington Heights. In the process, students have the opportunity to relate academic discussions of NYC as a global city to their experiences visiting a city of immigrant neighborhoods.

While few students have visited Detroit, all recognize it as the symbolic heart of the American industrial era. In this city, students are confronted with a post-industrial shrinking city in which government has withdrawn more and more city services, and residents have become increasingly creative in the ways that they make do. Faculty challenge students to discuss issues of extreme disinvestment, extraordinary local initiative, single-industry catharsis, and underlying racism, pushing them to communicate about topics that are seemingly outside of their concerns as residents of predominantly middle class communities and wealthy nations.

Whether the program begins in New York City or Detroit, students are asked to toss their preconceptions into the air. Stark differences are uncovered right here at home just as unexpected similarities are found across the globe. During the orientation city program, students meet the people who are making neighborhoods and institutions work, and they are thus provided with a starting point for communicating with teachers in unlikely places and positions. As they go on to study internationally, they carry with them the basics of learning to unlearn as well as a common platform to begin to think comparatively about their homes cities, the launch city and the cities they will study.

Communicating across perceived social and physical boundaries is a major step in the experiential learning process. Drawing on the strength of experiential methodologies and insights, the program sustains the challenge across several cities, and in the process, students' assumptions are regularly questioned, and their skills of observation, communication and critical thinking are continuously engaged. Just when students begin to be comfortable, they move to the next city and begin the learning process again. Repetition and comparison of topics and cities through the semester reinforce the learning cycle. As they become more adept, their ability to make sense of partial knowledge grows, as does their initiative and creativity exploring and explaining their discoveries.

We choose to study in cities that represent the influences that are shaping the 21st century global city: migration, rapid expansion, neoliberalism, interdependence, increasing inequity. In this era of globalization, these are places where social innovation, political interaction and economic inter-

vention are visible and accessible. Our itineraries include cities on three continents so that topics, such as housing or transportation, are actively understood from diverse cultural and geographic perspectives. A comparison among cities such as Delhi, Dakar and Buenos Aires or Sao Paulo, Cape Town and Hanoi assures that common topics are seen through exceptionally different lenses. Focus continually shifts between local contexts and perspectives to global problems, processes, and patterns.

Recycling, for example, is a topic familiar to most students through their home or school experience. The extent and success of recycling initiatives in cities varies greatly. Human participation in cycles of disposal and reuse are far more complex than simply sorting paper and glass for anonymous pick up. In Buenos Aires, the 2001 fiscal crisis was the impetus for the growth of a social and economic network of cartoneros who travel the city, work in the streets, and form a significant sector of the informal economy processing recyclable materials. In Cape Town, waste for some is material available for new uses to another. A thriving livelihood has emerged by marginalized people who are creatively reusing drink cans, plastics, and other people's "trash" to fashion into jewelry or art. In the movement of refuse, public and private sectors play different roles that have developed out of economic necessity, social acceptability and citizen, NGO, or leader-driven public policy. Through a comparative analysis of recycling or some other urban phenomenon, students journey into the stories of a city that reveal the interlocking systems of people and processes by which cities function. The comparison across countries develops a perspective on, and appreciation for, the complexity of global and local systems.

The comparative investigation that takes place across cities means that students are continually developing their skills of observation, communication, and reading of specific cities in a global context. At the beginning of the semester, each student chooses a specific topic to examine in every city. Students may choose a comparative analysis project on the topic of public space in cities, for example. Before the semester begins, students are often quite certain about what constitutes public space and what is considered appropriate and inappropriate behavior in such places. Then they observe ballroom dancing beneath highway overpasses in Beijing, encounter the decades-old weekly demonstration by mothers of the "Disappeared" in the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, and see a row of barbers giving hair-

cuts and shaves on a busy sidewalk in Hanoi. Students have to, and tend to reconsider their values, expectations, and beliefs. Their assumptions turn into questions that surface through comparative observation: What constitutes public space? What kinds of behaviors are considered appropriate? Where and what is public and private? Who decides how it should be used? Our experience is that these questions only emerge after observing multiple settings and interacting with people and places that are distinct from familiar environments.

Different cities, different alternatives, different aspirations, different realities: with sustained comparison, students are confronted with the ambiguity of problem solving in multiple contexts. This is what we aspire to teach students through this urban immersion experience.

Study Abroad and Professional/ Personal Development

Study on the IHP Cities program comes at an important point in the intellectual development of a student. They achieve, at this moment, some mastery of the skills needed to succeed as an undergraduate; and to do effective graduate research, to work as qualified professionals, and to become informed, globally-aware citizens. In studying each city, students take an introspective look at their own lives with respect to class, race and ethnicity, gender, and with regard to their future life choices.

Experiential education on the IHP Cities program is intended to help students prepare to make the leap from undergraduate level studying to graduate and professional level thinking. By experiencing real-life forces, students come to grips with conflicting realities. Education can be thought of as a series of steps that develop the skills required to deal with life and professional responsibilities. A bright student in high school excels by memorizing facts and figures relevant to the subject at hand. In college, there is more information than can ever be memorized, so students develop a skill set that allows them to succeed by mastering the themes and concepts presented in each course. At the graduate level, and particularly in writing a thesis, a student needs to be able to sort out conflicting statistics, opinions, and theories in order to support a "thesis" of one's own. There can no longer be one "right" answer; and, indeed, what may be quite right from one vantage point may be quite wrong from another. These are skills that are essential to professional

work, and skills that are important in living an effective and influential life.

Students cannot distance themselves from their learning when abstractions and theories are observed in everyday application. In the classroom one can study theories of mode choice in transportation, for example. Under what circumstances will people choose to drive a car, take a bus, ride a bicycle or walk? Theory becomes reality as students are confronted with this choice when they travel from their host family's residence to class each day based on limited time and cash, desired comfort and convenience. They learn more from the subway planner or the bus operator and they hear about onerous transfers from the residents of outlying districts. Their host family instructs them in the status associated with each transportation option. Just when they have come to understand mode choice in one city, their new-found certainty is challenged by the realities of another city on a different continent; and then it is tested once more.

For example, in Delhi, the inexpensive Tata Nano automobile has captured the imagination of many who now carry whole families on a motor scooter. The government scrambles in vain to keep up with the infrastructure demands of rapidly expanding motorization. Meanwhile, in Hanoi, the mode of choice for a majority of people is adamantly a motor scooter. This choice of mode directly influences the way land in the city is used and affects how people shop. By contrast, in Beijing, motorcycles are banned entirely in the central city. And while there is a social and political bias towards cars, the city is building a highly capital-intensive rail transit system. Nevertheless, while there seems at first glance to be a particular chosen transport direction in each of these cities, the realities for people in specific neighborhoods, with different incomes, with specific abilities and with other desires is decidedly different from that norm. At the same time, environmental consciousness is growing around the globe, pointing urban dwellers in new directions.

Engaging urban institutions, systems, and individual voices demands thoughtful reflection about one's own background, choices, and opportunities in the world. In each city we visit, people from every walk of life are astounded by the opportunities of our students. In their personal journeys, students often begin to see themselves not as isolated individuals but as part of greater human, urban systems. Confronted with poverty, violence, and inequality, there is an increasing recognition and debate within the student group about their own positions of privileged participation in a

highly unequal world. Listening to local discourses of crime and stigmatized neighborhoods, they contrast this discourse of "the Other" with direct experience and communication across social and spatial divisions. It is then juxtaposed to their experiences in new cities and at home. It is an uncomfortable experience. To varying degrees, students develop the ability to learn on other people's terms and to resist the tendency to slip into the role of tourist or elite consumer. This process is supported by increasing confidence in one's ability to communicate in intercultural contexts and negotiate unknown places.

Conclusion

For any study abroad program based in a city, everyday experiences can become sources for learning. In terms of the lifetime value to a student, a trip by public bus to visit a community organization constructing their own housing or a waste treatment facility can be at least as educational as a tour of a museum. This may be neither the purpose nor the intellectual approach of many study abroad programs, but students benefit when the city is included in their intellectual work. The phenomenon of the "colonial student" (Ogden 2007), who benefits from a study abroad experience without discomfort, catches many universities in a race to serve that expectation. Legitimate issues of grades, accreditation, liability and safety can be easy reasons, even excuses, for avoiding challenges, particularly urban ones. The net result can be the loss of connection with people and place. Yet it is that connection that is the essence of first-hand experiential study, and therefore a necessary prerequisite for the learning that is possible from study abroad.

Student interaction with people and urban systems on IHP Cities programs is the result of organized experiences and exercises. As the interdisciplinary nature of faculty and students demonstrates, the subject of the city can be integrated into many courses of study. Other programs might incorporate first-hand city experiences into existing programs without difficulty. Traveling in small groups, using local public transport, eating street food, adopting mapping exercises or an ethnographic lens are tools readily employed. Each study abroad program is intended for a specific set of students and each expects a different outcome. All, however, might benefit from greater local immersion.

Cities are worthy of study in their own right because urban processes are far too often taken for granted, rather than understood as produced and reproduced daily by a range of actors and institutions. After completing the program,

students frequently say that things they took for granted they now understand to be much more complex. It is that realization that is essential to the development of solutions to real problems in this world, toward making cities work for more and more people, and toward achieving greater equity in the world.

The IHP Cities program hopes to instill in students a life-long care for cities: that they will be able to arrive in any city ready to explore, that they will come to understand that city through personal communication and observation, and that they will be able to engage with any environment on a professional and personal level. We hope this will be apparent in the roles that they play in shaping how cities work.

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