

Review paper

INNOVATIVE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL SOLUTIONS FOR RECLAIMING PUBLIC OPEN SPACES IN MULTI-FAMILY NEIGHBOURHOODS

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Abstract

This paper explores innovative social and cultural solutions for reclaiming public open spaces (hereafter, POS) in multi-family neighbourhoods, focusing on the following aspects: 1) satisfaction with living condition and neighbourhood perception; 2) socio-economic status of residents; and 3) residents' engagement and participation in (re)claiming POS. The theoretical framework is grounded in an analysis of literature and planning documents, while practical insights are drawn from case studies of best practices in the neighbourhoods of Drewitz (Potsdam) and Poptahof (Delft). The findings suggest that effective social and cultural approaches to reclaiming POS include the early integration of diversity, inclusive design strategies, the implementation of non-discriminatory policies, and the active involvement of residents in the design process.

Key words: public open space (POS), multi-family neighbourhood, social and cultural solutions (SCS)

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1. INTRODUCTION

Public open spaces (hereafter, POS) in multi-family housing are considered a common good essential to the social, cultural, and economic development of neighbourhoods. Current documents highlight their role and implementation of innovative social and cultural solutions within them (hereafter, SCS) in realizing human rights, fostering social interaction, empowering marginalized groups, and improving both neighbourhood perception and overall quality of life [1,2,3]. In some countries, these commitments are integrated into national and local development policies, urban strategies, and planning frameworks [2], while in others, the lack of their operationalization leads to various social, cultural, economic, and physical issues and disparities in multi-family neighbourhoods [3].

To assess the potential of SCS in planning and project activities related to POS within multi-family neighbourhoods, and to define guidelines for the sustainable development of POS, this research aims to investigate the following:

a) the general characteristics of SCS and their application in development activities concerning the reclamation of POS in multi-family neighbourhoods, with a focus on the following SCS aspects: 1) satisfaction with living conditions and neighbourhood perception; 2) socio-economic status of residents; and 3) residents' engagement and participation in (re)claiming POS; and

b) institutional, planning, and design approaches to SCS aimed at (re)integrating POS at the neighbourhood level.

The general characteristics of the selected aspects of SCS are grounded in an analysis of literature in the field, while institutional, planning, and design approaches are drawn from an analysis of best practices in the neighbourhoods of Drewitz (Potsdam) and Poptahof (Delft), serving as illustrative examples of applied SCS.

In line with the research focus, the paper is structured as follows: after presenting the methodology, the theoretical framework is examined, along with selected examples of best practices for the chosen aspects of SCS. The potential for their implementation is discussed, and the paper concludes with key findings and recommendations for the sustainable development of POS in multi-family neighbourhoods.

2. METHODOLOGY

The main method used in the paper is documentary analysis of both primary and secondary sources (including legislation, regulatory documents, strategies, plans, projects, grey literature, and scholarly articles), as well as chosen best practice related to SCS. The list of primary and secondary sources is provided in Section 8. Citing References.

3. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL SOLUTIONS FOR RECLAIMING POS IN MULTI-FAMILY NEIGHBOURHOODS: FRAMING THE CONTEXT

In this section of the paper, the following are examined: 1) relevant literature in the field related to the selected aspects of SCS, and 2) relevant best practice examples that illustrate the potential and significance of applying these aspects.

3.1. Social and cultural solutions: Analysis of literature in the field

One of the longest-standing debates in community development, including SCS implementation, is between 'place-based' and 'people-based' approaches. These approaches are applied in the context of various development and planning activities such as housing affordability, combating community decline, and poverty. Pugalís & Bentley [4] highlight that 'place-based' strategies are not a unified model, but a range of approaches that depend on local context and needs.

The question of whether to focus on distressed places (neighborhoods) or distressed people is complex. Crane [5] explores the strengths and weaknesses of both, noting that 'people-based' policies address individual needs, while 'place-based' approaches may better target areas/neighbourhoods with concentrated problems. The challenge is determining which approach is more effective for long-term change and how both can be combined for sustainable development. Bentley & Pugalís [6] argue that the debate overlooks the dual nature of community development, advocating for the integration of human needs into development strategies to achieve more successful and lasting transformations.

- **SCS aspect 1: Satisfaction with living conditions and neighbourhood perception**

While the living environment influences well-being and quality of life, both the physical characteristics of space and how individuals perceive and experience it play a key role. Housing satisfaction is a subjective measure shaped by physical, social, and economic factors, and reflects the degree of alignment between individuals and their surroundings [7,8]. Satisfaction with living in a neighbourhood can thus be described as an individual and group assessment and perception of three neighbourhood categories - physical, social, and economic [9,10,11,8], though some authors also include a symbolic dimension.

The social characteristics of a neighbourhood include the ability to interact with neighbours, a sense of belonging, perception of privacy and security, etc. [12], where POS plays a significant role. Analyses of certain implemented urban regeneration projects in multi-family residential neighbourhoods [7] indicate that negative outcomes can arise after the implementation of such projects if little attention is paid to the social needs of residents during the design phase. The most common negative outcomes are: 1) absence of identity and connection with the space, 2) the space not providing a sense of harmony with the social and cultural status of the residents, 3) poor environmental quality of the space, 4) dissatisfaction with the neighbourhood, and a lack of residents' willingness to engage in the care of the area due to its unfavorable "new" physical characteristics [7]. These consequences also apply to POS. In some cases, the project may even lead to greater insecurity, higher migration rates, and social and spatial segregation compared to the pre-regeneration situation.

- **SCS aspect 2: Socio-economic status of residents**

Empirical evidence suggests that the reclamation and enhancement of POS, both within the context of urban regeneration of multi-family neighbourhoods and in newly developed housing areas, can generate a variety of socio-economic benefits. The most notable among these are:

1. An increase in property values, attributable to improved environmental quality and altered perceptions of the neighbourhood following project implementation. The value of real estate tends to correlate with the quality of the surrounding environment [13], which is significantly influenced by the character and design of POS. Numerous examples of good practice [8] demonstrate that regeneration efforts which prioritize the preservation and enhancement of existing physical characteristics, particularly through the application of Nature-based Solutions (NbS) and innovative stormwater management systems (e.g., Sustainable Drainage Systems – SuDS), yield more pronounced economic benefits in terms of property value appreciation [8,9].
2. Employment generation, particularly when regeneration or development initiatives involve changes in the functional composition of the area, such as the introduction of mixed-use development strategies [9].

Furthermore, research identifies the following as key economic determinants of neighbourhood quality of life and resident satisfaction: 1) real estate value; 2) cost of living within the community, and 3) the socio-economic status of the neighbourhood.

• SCS aspect 3: Social inclusion of residents

Creating inclusive and diverse communities within multi-family housing requires intentional action and thoughtful planning. By embracing diversity from the outset, designing with inclusivity in mind, implementing non-discriminatory policies, and engaging with the local community, stakeholders can foster environments that promote a sense of belonging for all residents. Based on the literature review, opportunities for promoting resident inclusion in multi-family housing can be identified at five key stages: planning, design, construction, operation, and renewal of multi-storey neighbourhoods [8, 9]. Key recommendations for achieving social inclusion in both existing and newly developed multi-family neighbourhoods are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Key recommendations for achieving social inclusion in multi-family neighbourhoods.

Recommendation	
Embrace diversity from the start	In planning new multi-family developments or urban regeneration projects, prioritizing diversity from the outset is essential. This includes understanding the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of target groups through market research, enabling the design of POS to meet the needs of various age groups, cultures, and lifestyles.
Design with inclusivity in mind	Design is a key factor in fostering inclusivity, with universal design principles ensuring accessibility for individuals of all abilities—for instance, POS without architectural barriers or visual aids for people with hearing impairments.
Fostering a sense of belonging	Fostering an inclusive and diverse community requires creating a sense of belonging through shared spaces and activities that promote social interaction, such as gardens, community rooms, and regular events.
Implement non-discriminatory policies	Ensuring inclusivity also depends on the implementation of clear, non-discriminatory policies that protect all residents regardless of race, gender, age, or health condition.
Inclusion in the local community and participation of residents	Active participation of residents, local communities, and stakeholders through partnerships is essential for the successful realization of inclusive planning and development initiatives

• **SCS aspect 4: Residents engagement and participation**

The core of the participatory approach lies in enhancing the capacity of communities to take part in development and planning processes, enabling specific target groups to actively contribute to planned activities and thus support sustainable development. Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities [14], emphasizes the importance of public participation in planning, advocating for the active involvement of residents and urban space users in the formulation of urban policy and planning. This integral and participatory approach is recognized as a central paradigm in current strategic frameworks, including the UN New Urban Agenda [15], and the Urban Agenda for the EU [16].

Resident participation is often a key factor—and an essential condition—for the success of various programs and planning or design activities (whether place-, people-, or institution-based), including those related to POS. In this context, community participation is seen not only as a prerequisite for the acceptance of proposed planning and design solutions [9], but also for the ongoing care and maintenance of POS in both urban regeneration and new residential developments.

For participation to be truly effective, it is essential to establish clear ground rules, define specific goals, and avoid treating the process as a mere formality. In practice, a wide range of tools is available to help local government representatives, planning, and design teams develop and implement meaningful community participation strategies that include both formal and informal groups [17]. Local institutions and stakeholders, including urban planners and project teams, can employ various methods and techniques for communication and consultation with the public and neighbourhood residents throughout the participatory process of POS planning and design (Table 2).

Table 2. Techniques and tools for citizen participation

Purpose	Techniques for participation
Preliminary understanding of the situation	Interviews with key actors Stakeholder survey analysis
Opinion polling	Questionnaire Group interview Target group survey
Promoting participation	Event (symposium, observation, festival, concert, fair) List of addresses Formulation of corporate identity
Dialogue	Information and data collection Open dialogue Workshop Working group
Dissemination, understanding of opinion	Information materials for public relations (brochures, flyers, catalogues) Open lines for comments and suggestions Website Media Information center

Source: Horita and Koizumi, 2009.

Resident participation is a particularly critical factor for the success of planning and design in urban regeneration projects, as these activities take place within an existing, physically defined environment [18]. This context imposes limitations on the spatial distribution and applicability of design solutions related to POS, which can ultimately influence how users perceive the justification—or lack thereof—of the proposed interventions. Ongoing communication, education, and meaningful community involvement can ensure that POS

reclamation projects address residents' concerns, attitudes, and needs, thereby increasing acceptance among the local population.

3.2. Social and cultural solutions: Best practice examples

3.2.1. Drewitz, Potsdam

Drewitz is the youngest of ten multi-family neighbourhoods constructed on the outskirts of Potsdam during the former GDR era (1950s–1989), featuring 4,500 prefabricated apartments arranged in five-story panel buildings around large inner courtyards [19]. Like similar neighbourhoods, Drewitz experienced gradual deterioration of both its housing stock and POS, which, combined with socio-economic challenges and high unemployment, made regeneration a priority.

Following the political changes of the early 1990s, the federal and state Programme for Urban Development of Large Housing Estates (*Städtebauliche Weiterentwicklung großer Neubaugebiete*) was launched in 1997. In addition to housing renovation, the programme also addressed the renewal of numerous POS such as squares and courtyards. Recognizing the importance of resident-oriented development, early community participation was emphasized. Information sessions and workshops organized by district management enabled residents to contribute their ideas and fostered a stronger connection to their neighbourhood. For instance, involving children and youth in designing recreational areas was seen as a strategy to reduce vandalism (Figure 1).

The improved image of “Platte” neighbourhoods and the continued involvement of local stakeholders reflect the success of this participatory approach. Today, residents' committees actively support urban development initiatives in nearly all renewal areas—such as the “Initiative Am Schlaatz,” project advisory boards in *Waldstadt II*, and citizen forums at *Am Stern*. In 2006, advisory boards were established for the districts of *Am Stern/Drewitz/Kirchsteigfeld* and *Schlaatz/Waldstadt I and II*, comprising representatives from political parties, citizen groups, the housing sector, external experts, and urban development coordinators [19].

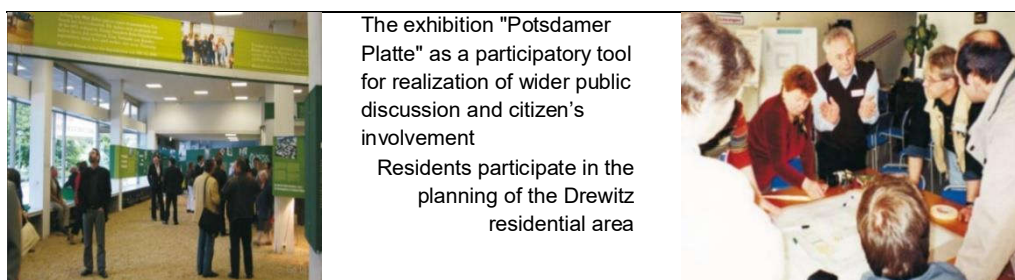


Figure 1. Different forms of participation of residents in Drewitz, Potsdam.
Source: *Potsdamer Platte...im grünen Bereich*, 2008.

One of the projects realized in this way was a pilot initiative for the regeneration and redesign of the inner courtyard between *Robert-Baberske-Straße* and *Eduard-Winterstein-Straße* in Drewitz (Figure 2). Implemented between 2002 and 2005, the project covered an area of approximately 5,000 m². Led by the urban development agency *Stadtkontor*, the project followed a participatory approach, with residents of the surrounding buildings actively involved in all phases of design and implementation.



Residents were involved in the entire process of (re)designing and renovating the inner courtyard. Rainwater is channelled from the roofs of the surrounding buildings through open gutters into bioretention areas. In addition to managing rainwater runoff, the bioretention system has contributed to increased biodiversity and a reduction in the urban heat island effect, while also creating an aesthetically appealing and comfortable POS. The design of the newly created children's playground reflects the theme of water and nature, with equipment stylized in the form of reeds.

Figure 2. Inner courtyard Robert-Baberske-Straße/Eduard-Winterstein-Straße, Drewitz, Potsdam, Germany. Pilot project of POS regeneration funded by the "Social City" fund, based on the application of participatory approach, SuDS and NbS.

Source: Straube Peer, ed., 2008.

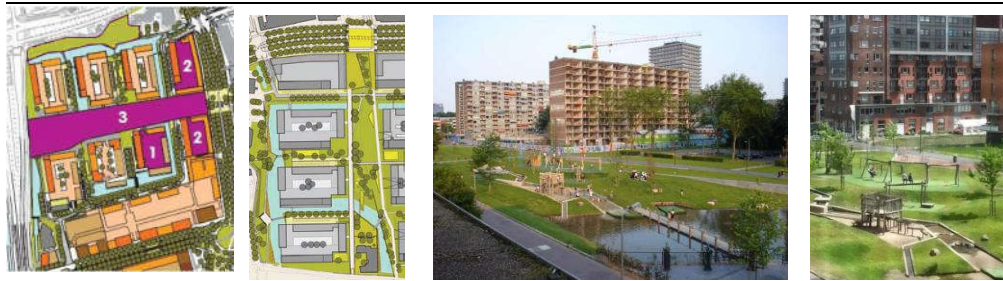
Guided by the belief that the urban environment should include as much greenery and natural elements as possible, residents selected "water" as the central theme, enabling the implementation of Nature-based Solutions (NbS) and innovative stormwater management approaches—not only in this project, but also in subsequent POS regeneration initiatives [8, 19]. This project became both an inspiration and a model for many similar efforts in Drewitz, which is now known as the "garden city."

3.2.1. Poptahof, Delft

Poptahof is a multi-family neighbourhood located in central Delft, built in the 1960s as one of the first developments outside the historic city centre. Covering 18.6 hectares, it is home to approximately 2,800 residents. Over time, the neighbourhood became marked by multiple forms of deprivation, cultural diversity without cohesion, and neglected, anonymous POS. Challenges included a high concentration of minority groups, lack of social cohesion, and degraded, mono-functional POS that lacked hygiene, equipment, and appeal—leading to insecurity, a weak sense of community, and user-unfriendly spaces, as seen in many post-WWII housing areas [9,20].

In response, the Delft municipal government and housing association Woonbron launched a restructuring initiative in 2000, aiming to make Poptahof a more livable and attractive place. A Master Plan was introduced and, in 2002, presented to residents through public events. Based on their feedback, the plan was revised in 2003 to address key issues: improving the monotonous housing stock (which was poorly rated on the market), enhancing safety (e.g., by introducing caretakers), and redesigning and upgrading POS as part of an integrated neighbourhood renewal strategy (Figure 3) [21].

The regeneration of POS in Poptahof was initiated by the housing corporation, but final decisions were made by residents, who opted for a mixed-use concept. The most significant outcome was the creation of the 25,000 m² multipurpose Poptapark (Figure 3), developed as part of the IMAGE12 project. Residents also advocated for a public vegetable garden and a children's playground. A key factor in the project's success was the establishment of a public-private partnership to jointly improve the neighbourhood, along with the introduction of "neighbourhood branding" in 2005, which helped shape activity planning, social and economic programs, and identify future residents' needs [9].



Master plan

Poptapark

Segments of Poptapark

Poptapark was designed in the central part of the LHE area and completed in 2008, on the site of a former river corridor surrounded by dense greenery. The park includes a children's play area, open lawns, and a green hill used for sunbathing, sledding, festivals, and other events. A cycling and walking path connects the park with the main street and shopping area. In addition, a community gardening space encourages social interaction and a sense of territorial belonging. To celebrate the transformation and promote the value of improved public open spaces, the "Poptahof Metamorphosis" festival was held in the park.

Figure 3: Multifunctional Poptapark
Source: van AltenaVanessa al., 2007.

It was recognized that the central park had strong potential to enhance the quality of life in Poptahof and establish a distinct residential identity. In 2009, a year-long research project on POS improvement was launched, focusing on differentiation, redesign, and beautification. The objectives included: 1) mapping different types of POS; 2) identifying parameters that support social interaction; and 3) encouraging collaboration between professionals and residents. Data were collected through field observation, mini-interviews with residents, and passer-by surveys.

The research was conducted in three phases - first, analysis of different POS types, their features, and user activities; second, interviews on usage patterns, problems, and improvement needs; and third, surveys examining daily use (frequency, companions, activities), perceived qualities, and design suggestions—particularly regarding functionality, safety, and programming (Figure 4).

The main success factors were: 1) resident participation, which fostered ownership and responsibility for the housing environment; 2) cultural openness and acceptance of diverse lifestyles; 3) spatial variety, enabling formal and informal gathering spaces across different POS types; and 4) active monitoring to prevent crime and vandalism. Ultimately, the park's regeneration modernized the image of the entire residential complex and helped attract additional investment in mixed-use (residential and commercial) developments.



Residents participation in the preparation of the Master plan proposal

Project organization information day - dialogue between residents and the project manager

Workshop sessions held to explore the identity of Poptahof

Figure 4: Different forms of participation of residents in Poptahof
Source: van AltenaVanessa al., 2007.

Besides all the above, the regeneration of POS is also significant as an example of the application of green-blue infrastructure. In this context, by creating visible water features (including a water playground), based on the winning idea from a children's competition as a way of involving the local community in the design process, the area has become more engaging and enjoyable for residents [22]. Disconnecting impervious surfaces from the water system enhances flood resilience and sustainability. Furthermore, the participation of children means that they became partly responsible for the newly created water features, which helps prevent vandalism. The natural treatment systems and wetlands also provide opportunities for ecological development, educational programs, and recreational use, adding value beyond water management.

This holistic approach not only enhances the urban landscape but also addresses critical environmental challenges such as water management, sustainability, and climate resilience. By combining water-saving technology, natural water treatment, and community-oriented green spaces, the project in Poptahof sets a valuable example of how urban planning can balance ecological health with social and recreational needs

4. DISCUSSION

The conducted research, especially the analysis of best practice examples, indicates that the SCS aimed at reclaiming POS within multi-family neighborhoods are mostly spatially concentrated, whether referring to an entire neighborhood (Poptapark) or one or several urban blocks (Drewitz). In this sense, it can be concluded that place-based SCS, as well as the planning and project activities leading to POS reclamation, are more prevalent, which is particularly characteristic of urban regeneration in inherited neighborhoods. These neighborhoods are often characterized by low incomes, high social service demands, deteriorating housing stock, high unemployment rates, social exclusion, etc. They also suffer from inadequate infrastructure, public services, POS, failing schools, and a lack of jobs matching the residents' skills. It seems that the most direct step to help these communities is to preserve these places, including POS, which is the main focus of urban regeneration projects, as well as most social and economic development programs and plans.

Additionally, the research indicates that SCS can be implemented in two ways: 1) as primary, i.e. as a need (when the focus of program and project activities is on social problems and needs, with the increase in the usability, design, and ecological potential of POS being seen as a key factor in addressing these issues); and 2) as secondary, i.e. as an opportunity (when they appear as additional benefits of programs and project activities aimed at creating or improving the physical, functional, and ecological characteristics of the neighborhood or POS).

Although the analysis of best practice examples focused on civic engagement and citizens' participation, the research findings also highlight a wide range of benefits from implementing SCS in reclaiming POS. The most important benefits include: 1) satisfaction with housing and living conditions; 2) positive changes in the perception of the neighborhood; 3) improvement in the socio-economic status of residents; 4) reduction of social inequality; and 5) social inclusion.

A review of the literature and analysis of best practice examples also indicate that creating inclusive and diverse communities within multi-family housing requires intentional actions and thoughtful planning and design. The following key recommendations for achieving social

inclusion in multi-family housing and the POS within them can be identified: 1) embrace diversity from the outset; 2) design with inclusivity in mind; 3) foster a sense of belonging; 4) implement non-discriminatory policies; and 5) involve local communities and enable resident participation.

Based on the literature review, opportunities for resident engagement and participation are recognized at five stages: planning, design, construction, operation, and renewal. Active engagement of the local community, stakeholders, and residents through various forms of partnership and cooperation were recognized in the analyzed best practice examples as important factors for the successful implementation of program and project activities.

The analysis of selected best practice examples highlighted various forms of resident participation in the operationalization of social and cultural solutions in restoring POS in multi-family neighborhoods. The analysis also emphasized the benefits of participation-based programs or planning activities for the quality of POS, strengthening social interactions, neighborhood identity, and the overall quality of life in the neighborhood. Research findings indicate that by combining NbS, SUDS, UGI, and other eco-oriented urban approaches with social and cultural solutions, the analyzed examples demonstrate how urban planning and design can balance ecological health with social and recreational needs.

5. CONCLUSION

SCS play a significant role in reclaiming POS in multi-family residential neighborhoods, both inherited and newly planned. The purpose of their implementation through strategic documents, urban planning, and urban regeneration varies — they may be applied either as primary activities (a need) or as part of broader actions (an opportunity) aimed at sustainable urban development or neighborhood regeneration, where they are recognized as predominantly place-based.

The most important goals and benefits of applying SCS in both cases are: 1) satisfaction with housing and living conditions; 2) a positive change in the perception of the neighborhood; 3) improvement of the socio-economic status of residents; 4) reduction of social inequality; 5) increased social inclusion; and 6) community engagement.

Resident participation is often a key factor and imperative for the success of programs, planning, and design activities that help realize the aforementioned goals and benefits. In this sense, community participation strategies are seen as a prerequisite not only for the acceptance of proposed planning and design solutions but also for the ongoing maintenance and care of the POS.

Some key recommendations for achieving social inclusion in multi-family neighborhoods include: 1) embracing diversity from the outset; 2) designing with inclusivity in mind; 3) fostering a sense of belonging; 4) implementing non-discriminatory policies; and 5) involving local communities and enabling resident participation.

When SCS are applied in synergy with ecologically based approaches such as Nature-based Solutions (NbS), Ecosystem-based Adaptation (EbA), Urban Green Infrastructure (UGI), Blue-green Infrastructure (BGI), Water Sensitive Urban Design (WSUD), and Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS), the benefits are even wider. In this case, they can include enhancing the resilience of neighborhoods to climate change, increasing the social resilience of neighborhoods, and supporting their sustainable urban development.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was supported by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia, under the Agreement on Financing the Scientific Research Work of Teaching Staff at the Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture, University of Niš - Registration number: 451-03-137/2025-03/200095 dated 04/02/2025. and by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia, #GRANT No 7572, Reclaiming Public Open in Residential Areas: Shifting Planning Paradigms and Design Perspectives for a Resilient Urban Future – RePOS.

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