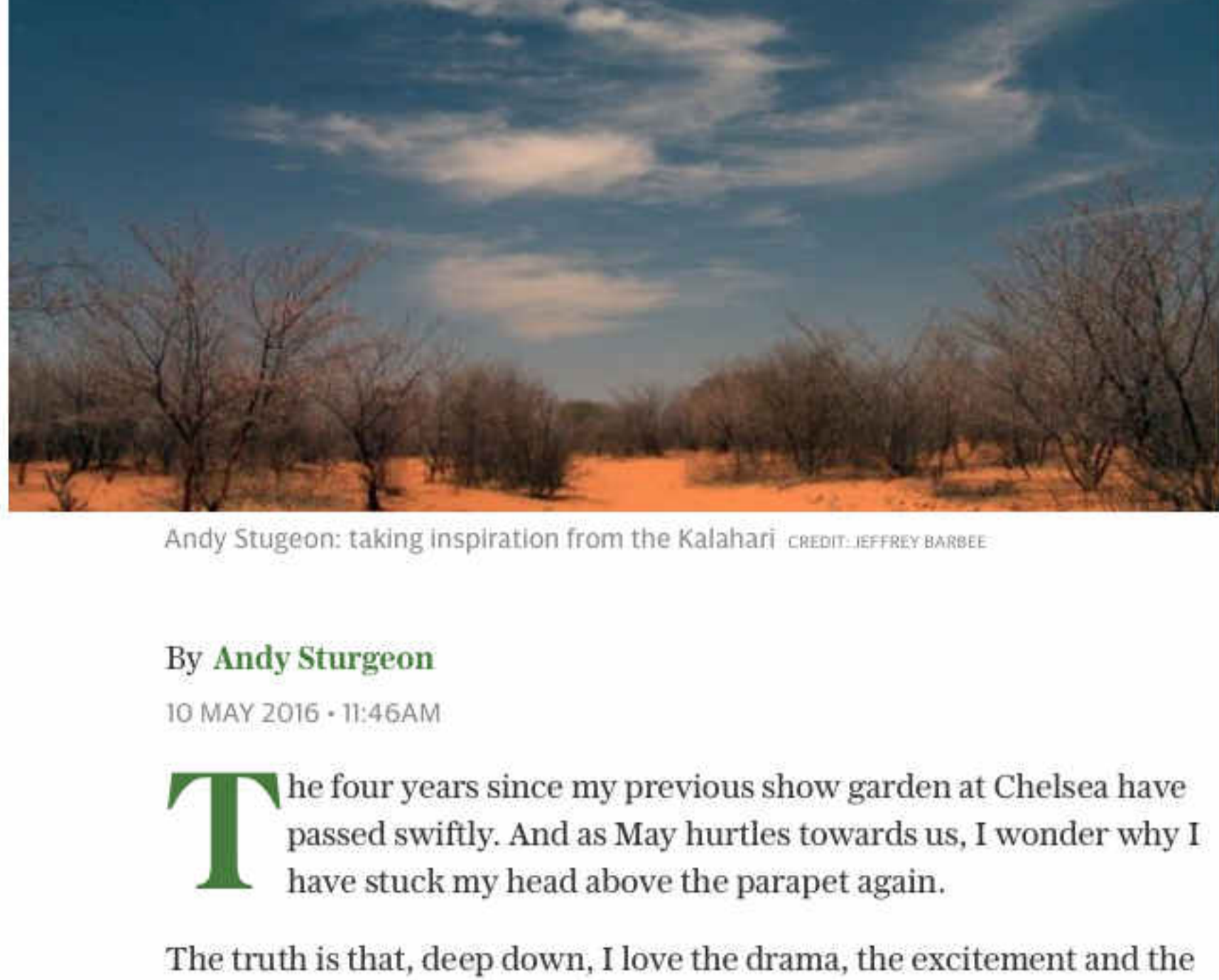


Home > Lifestyle > Gardening > Gardens to visit

Chelsea Flower Show 2016: how dinosaurs inspired The Telegraph's garden



Andy Sturgeon: taking inspiration from the Kalahari CREDIT: JEFFREY BARBEE

By **Andy Sturgeon**

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The four years since my previous show garden at Chelsea have passed swiftly. And as May hurtles towards us, I wonder why I have stuck my head above the parapet again.

The truth is that, deep down, I love the drama, the excitement and the jeopardy. I get a kick out of it. It's a drug. What's more, I owe my career to the Chelsea Flower Show so there are commercial incentives, too.

This will be the eighth time I have put myself through this ordeal since 2001 and it doesn't get any easier. In fact, the pressure I put myself under increases. In theory, I know how to win a gold medal, but I'm not the sort of person to go through the motions.



Andy Sturgeon CREDIT: BRIAN SMITH

Worse still, I appear to enjoy making life difficult for myself and I'm never totally happy wallowing in my comfort zone. Chelsea, after all, is an adventure, and adventures are meant to be exciting, even dangerous. So, as I sat down at my kitchen table one Sunday night last autumn, I did not do the sensible thing and draw a slick, contemporary "London" garden to pull in commissions from well-heeled clients and cement my career. Instead, I began modelling a garden that was a bit different, risky even. I wanted to push boundaries and flex my design muscles.

My starting point was a childhood memory. I vividly recall entering the cavernous halls of the Natural History Museum as a boy of no more than ten and feeling shivers run down my spine. As I stood in that cathedral of knowledge and gazed at the magnificent Diplodocus skeleton, I received a profound lesson in scale, time, theatre, architecture, history and nature. I remember how tiny and insignificant I felt.

Of course, I've been back many times, first as a child and more recently with my own three boys – and, on each occasion, I am awestruck. It is that feeling of excitement that I want to capture at Chelsea. These days it is hard to be amazed. The incredible has become commonplace as we are bombarded with jaw-droppingly unbelievable experiences by films, video games and science.



Andy's last garden at Chelsea in 2012 CREDIT: ALAMY

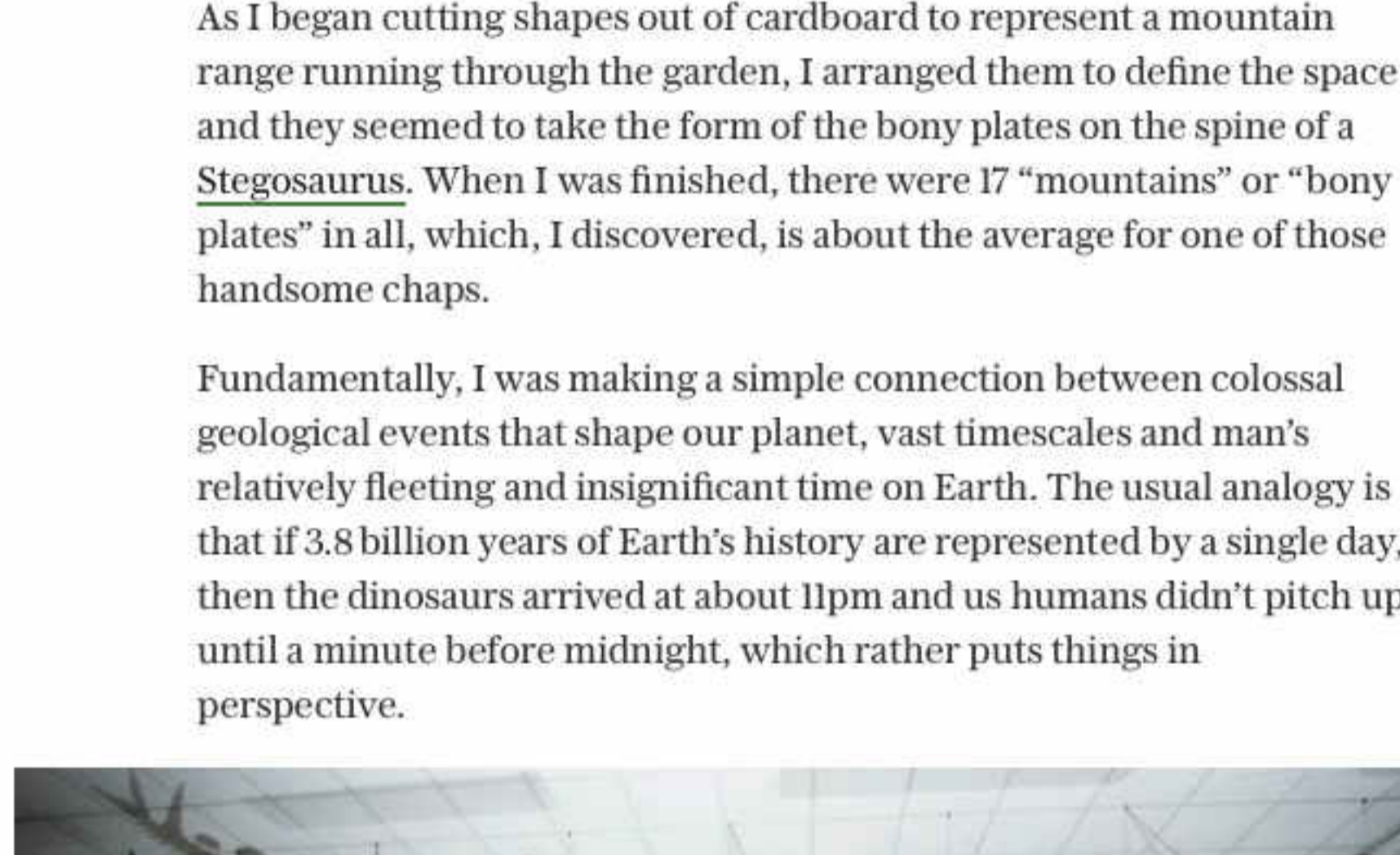
But I have noticed that the occasions when my boys are most amazed are when we are outside and in contact with nature. A few years ago, a desert sunset in the Sinai Peninsula was even declared "better than CGI". High praise, indeed.

We travel a lot as a family and I fill passports before they expire. Adventures get bigger and the bar is set higher. The jungles of Borneo, battling freak storms off the Dalmatian coast, road trips in the States and trekking the Kalahari will be the childhood memories of my boys, but so too will camping in Devon and walking in the South Downs.

This garden for Chelsea 2016 is really about the outdoors. This might seem a fairly dumb statement, but what I really mean is that it is about the big stuff: landscapes, countryside and wilderness. And, of course, the wide-eyed wonderment and adventure that can be found there.

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The garden is an imagined place, but nowhere in particular. I see it as a gently gardened part of a much wider natural landscape. It is rocky, there's water and you can climb on it and hide in it. Think kids charging around and running riot, camping, making dens and lighting fires.



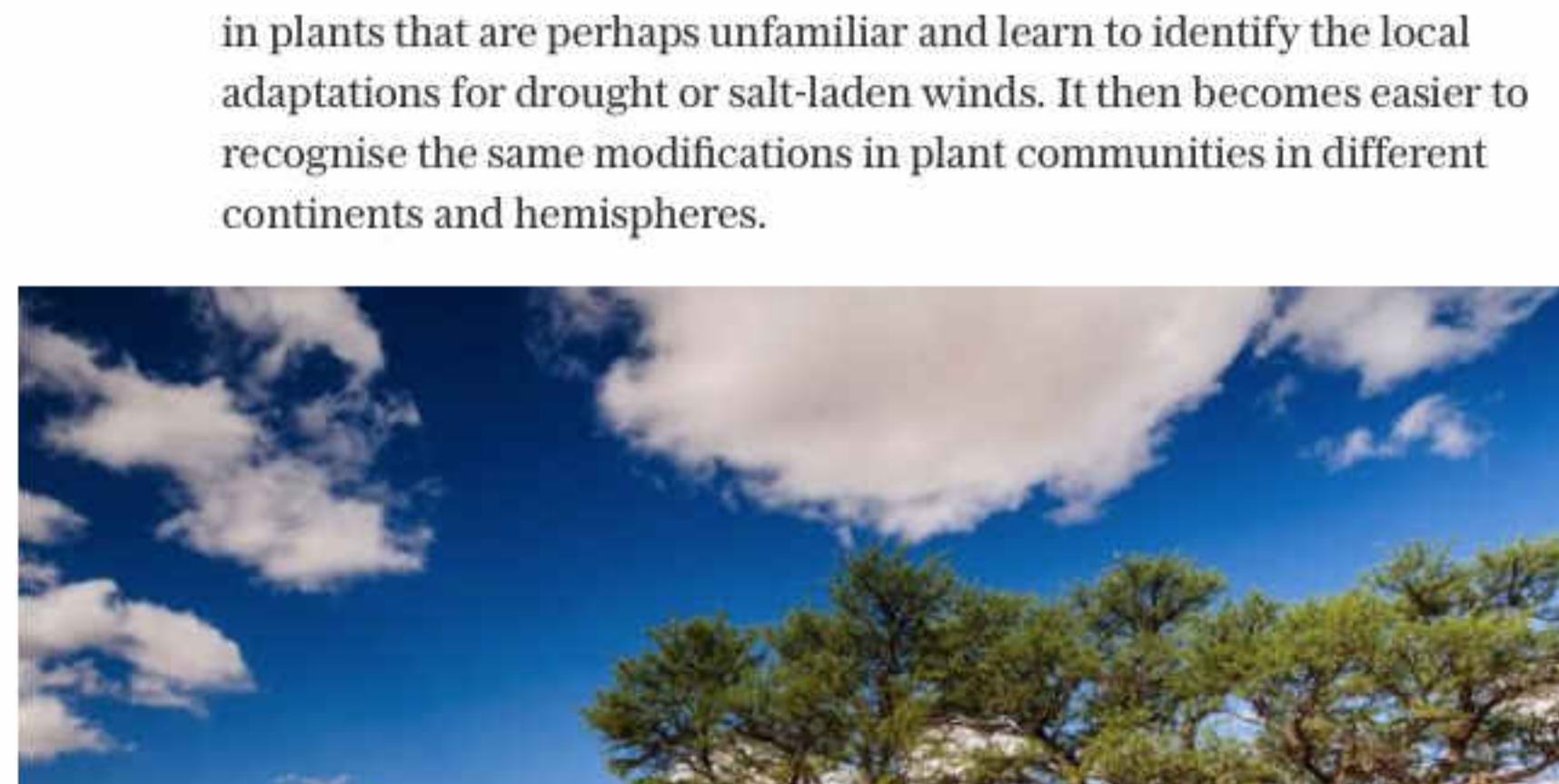
Inspirational: Seven Sisters cliffs, on the South Downs CREDIT: ALAMY

Yet it is also about being out in the wild under the stars, drinking a beer and chewing the fat while gazing into the flames and setting the world to rights. It is born out of my childhood experiences, but it also reflects how I want things to be for my kids.

And there are dinosaurs, too. Just before I designed this garden, I bought a fossilised penguin at auction. I don't know why. I had never been particularly interested in fossils, but he sits next to me on my desk and he is more than 30 million years old, which I find immensely humbling.

As I began cutting shapes out of cardboard to represent a mountain range running through the garden, I arranged them to define the space and they seemed to take the form of the bony plates on the spine of a Stegosaurus. When I was finished, there were 17 "mountains" or "bony plates" in all, which, I discovered, is about the average for one of those handsome chaps.

Fundamentally, I was making a simple connection between colossal geological events that shape our planet, vast timescales and man's relatively fleeting and insignificant time on Earth. The usual analogy is that if 3.8 billion years of Earth's history are represented by a single day, then the dinosaurs arrived at about 11pm and us humans didn't pitch up until a minute before midnight, which rather puts things in perspective.



Putting the pieces together: Andy has been influenced by the stegosaurus CREDIT: PAUL GROVER

Bronze seemed the obvious choice for the mountains/Stegosaurus plates – I like the ambiguity – as it represents a period in time. There is also a happy coincidence that the fossil-rich limestone I am using as paving was laid down in the late Jurassic period, which is when the Stegosaurus roamed the Earth. Everything appeared to fit together.

Over the years, I have developed a style that is significantly sculptural. The form of that sculpture defines the spaces and the character of the garden, and this year is no exception.

And then, of course, there are plants. Lots of them. In the past few years, I have worked on gardens all across the Mediterranean, from Portugal to Italy and Turkey. I've bought plants from nurseries in Spain, the south of France and Tuscany, and I have fallen in love with Italy in general. I'm fascinated by the natural plant communities I see. I'm interested in the way they grow together, the way they colonise unpromising ground, how they prosper and how they struggle.

By visiting a project regularly wherever it is in the world, I get to see the same place during different seasons. I notice the seasonal changes in plants that are perhaps unfamiliar and learn to identify the local adaptations for drought or salt-laden winds. It then becomes easier to recognise the same modifications in plant communities in different continents and hemispheres.



An Acacia tree on the Kalahari CREDIT: ALAMY

I spot connections between plants in the Mediterranean and those on the Black Sea on the Crimean Peninsula and further afield in South America, New Zealand and California.

It is, I realise, amateur botany, but I firmly believe these observations of plants in their natural habitats can inform and influence plant selection in a garden – regardless of the climate you are working in. A Yorkshire hedgerow or a Berkshire roadside are equally as informative as a scree slope in Sarajevo or a hillside in China.

If you put plants together that are adapted to the same sort of conditions, they will always look right and thrive together – even if they are from opposite sides of the globe.

This year I've picked plants from all these places and more. Crocus, the nursery that is growing all my plants, would normally gather them up from around the UK and northern Europe.

This year I have dragged Crocus, willingly I hope, out of its comfort zone. Peter Clay, its co-director, and I have been shopping in the south of France, Italy and Spain. Rather than sending everything back home to spend the winter shivering in Surrey, all the plants are growing (rather faster than we would like) in sunny Almeria. We are all, of course, slightly worried. But this is an experiment, we are all part of this adventure and it is not without risks.

Andy Sturgeon has won RHS gold medals at Chelsea Flower Show in 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010 (for The Telegraph, when he was also awarded Best in Show) and 2012. He has won gold awards in Singapore and Philadelphia, and three awards from the UK's Society of Garden Designers in 2014. Sturgeon mixes traditional materials with contemporary styling. His gardens are known for their sculptural characteristics and innovative planting. andysturgeon.com

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