

ACCESSIBLE ARCHIVES: STUDENTS AS ACTIVE USERS

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Received: 19 May 2008

Revised: 11 December 2008

Accepted: 15 January 2009

Abstract

At a time when archives, both locally and abroad, are feeling the impact of a range of constraints it has become imperative to make the viability – and usability – of their holdings a matter of prime concern. It has indeed become imperative to not only overcome the persistent image that relegates archivists to the unknown echelons of disused spaces where they apparently dote on documents that no longer form part of an institution's core functioning, but also to take on the challenges both within and outside of the archival environment. It will be argued in this article, that by actively creating an awareness of the archives within an institution, and inducing practical engagement with its holdings, its existence is ratified and enhanced. Using the University of Pretoria Archives (UPA) as a case study, various initiatives that have been taken over the past decade will be discussed as possible incentives to reposition archives within the broader infrastructure of the domains within which they are situated. Although each environment has its own unique features, it is believed that initiatives suitably applied can enhance the archives' particular situation. This article is therefore a practical reflection on what can be achieved through heightened awareness and use.

Keywords: Accessibility, Archival user, Institutional archives, Promoting archives, Tertiary students

Inactive archives

In the corporate and public realm the place of archives has persistently been at the bottom of the food chain – both in terms of status as well as financial and other resources. According to stalwart archivist Sir Hilary Jenkinson, formerly of the United Kingdom Public Record Office in the first half of the 20th century, “archival work is most effective when it is done unobtrusively”. He viewed archiving as a mechanical process, where the archivist’s role was merely as “recipient” and “keeper” of “objective records”. (Greene 2002: 51-52) For many years, this perception persisted and archivists were merely perceived as mechanical processors of societies’ records who worked in isolation to collect “indisputable”, “objective” facts (Diamond 1994: 89-91; Stout 2002: 13).

One of the main reasons for this passive involvement in the record-keeping process was the understanding that archivists had to ensure the safekeeping of records of permanent value. This is not limited to the physical preservation of records. As “keepers of archives”, the archivists had to ensure that the content was not tampered with or distorted in any way by safeguarding the integrity of records, which entailed that the “impartiality” of the record had to be protected and that a “balanced” view of decisions and events was reflected. Because of the important role archival records play in the judicial, legal and civil spheres of society, traditionally archivists had to avoid any intervention in their decision-making and actions that could misrepresent the “original” meaning and jeopardise the “impartial” nature of the record (Craig 1990-1991: 135; Diamond 1994:89; Ericson 1990-1991: 116-117; MacNeil 1994: 140-141).

Thus the archivists hoped that they could create a work environment free from “bias” and other influences by employing so-called scientific methodologies to achieve an “objective” representation of the past (Nesmith 2002: 25, 28; Russell 1991: 132). This basically entailed isolating themselves from the society in which they operated and employing a methodology that could assist them in their attempt to

capture this “universal record of truth” (Greene 2002: 51-52; MacNeil 1994: 139; Stout 2002: 13).

This rather staid approach was also evident in what could be termed attempts at “archival outreach”. Interpreted as “public programming”, this aspect was limited to the publishing of finding aids and other “scientific” works (Craig 1990-1991: 136). Serious scholarly research was encouraged at the expense of the general public’s participation, which archivists felt could possibly “contaminate” the integrity and objectivity of their work (Blais and Enns 1990-1991: 109; Cook 1990-1991: 126; Stout 2002: 12). Unfortunately, in trying to create a so-called value-free work environment, the true nature of archival work was very narrowly interpreted. In a sense the archival world turned its back on the source of its holdings, namely the human experience and dimension. Consequently, over the years, an almost frigid archival culture of “neutrality” and self-effacement developed, which did not reflect the true purpose or place of archives in society. Thus in the past, the nature of society and its stereotyped perception of archives were such that archivists could avoid confronting the issue of making their holding accessible in such a way to encourage active usage.

Active archives

Towards the end of the twentieth century this situation has changed dramatically both in terms of the world the archives is situated in, as well as the nature of the archive. The rate and scope of this change has accelerated to such an extent that it has been claimed that the archival profession is “on the brink of a new paradigm in its work environment” (Stout 2002:18). Supporting this claim by Leon Stout, 56th president of the Society of American Archivists, is South African archivist, Verne Harris, who underlines the urgency of adapting to new challenges and feels that archivists will “invite disaster if they ignore the changes in the records environment” (Harris 1997:6).

It is agreed that one of the biggest changes in the archival profession is the advent of electronic record-keeping. This has not only brought about a change in the archivist’s role from passive receiver and keeper to an active participant in the record keeping process, but more importantly, it has radically altered people’s perceptions of the use and availability of information (Craig 1997: 120; De Beer 1994: 5;

Nesmith 2002: 40). Due to democratization, better education as well as greater availability of information in the electronic environment, people have to a degree become more aware of the important role information can play in the enhancement of their lives. (Blais and Enns 1990-1991: 102; Cook 1997: 12; Craig 1990-1991: 135) The cultural importance that archival records play in offering citizens a sense of history, culture, identity and locality and provide them with personal and collective memories, have come to the foreground over the past few decades (Watson, 2002: 4). It has been argued that, especially in times of change, people return to their history to find stability in their past (Cook 1990-1991: 123; Stout 2002: 12). Moreover, in emerging and new democracies, “open and viable” archives are regarded as “vital in anchoring citizenship” which in turn “lies at the heart of social cohesion” (Harris 2007: 8-9).

On a mundane, but highly practical note, being better informed empowers people to question governmental decisions and the way their tax-money is spent. As tax-funded institutions, archives have to justify their actions not only to their founding institution, but also to the people who fund their activities – a matter then of accountability (Hamilton and Mangcu 2006: 2-3; Grabowski 1992: 468; Stout 2002: 12, 15-16). In an era where government funding all over the world is decreasing and the competition for it increasing, public funded institutions have to show a greater responsibility towards the people they serve to validate their existence (Blais and Enns 1990-1991: 102-103).

However, fiscal responsibility alone will not ensure that people will be able to access the information they need. The public perception that archives are isolated, elitist institutions which provide state departments or companies with administrative and judicial justification (Blais and Enns 1990-1991: 105; Cook 1990-1991: 123), or where the select few academics can indulge in their interest in history (Grabowski 1992: 465, 469-470) have to be replaced with an understanding that archives are, as stated by Eric Ketelaar “... of the people, for the people, by the people” (Ketelaar 1992: 5-6).

In order to answer to this call, the questions of active participation, as well as public programming, have come to dominate the archival discourse. Being actively involved and taking heed of the needs of its

users are now considered an integral part of archival work. Archivists have to be actively involved in “building bridges between their institutions and the public” (Brothman 1991-1992: 75); they have to “take the archives to the people” (Harris, 1997: 12); and make them accessible physically and intellectually (Harris 1999: 79, 84). Public programming has to become the core around which other archival duties are planned and executed rather than an activity on the periphery of the archivist’s duties (Cook 1997: 12; Ericson 1990-1991: 114; Russell 1991: 132). Taking this point further, Blais and Enns (1990-1991:102) argue that the archivist has to re-examine the position of their institutions in society and to “adapt to meet their users’ needs”.

From the early 1980s, leading archivist, Verne Harris articulated this central importance of the “use” of archives. In a text published shortly after the promulgation of the National Archives of South Africa Act in 1996, he wrote that “use” was indeed “the goal of all archival endeavour” (Harris 1997: 10-11). He substantiated this claim by referring to Canadian Timothy Ericson who aptly claimed:

... if after we brilliantly and meticulously appraise, arrange, describe and conserve our records, nobody comes to use them, then we have wasted our time (Harris 1997: 10).

Harris believed – or probably more correctly hoped - that this realisation regarding the importance of “use” would permeate the post-1990 archival discourse in this country. He pointed to the (now defunct) South African Society of Archivists’ 1993 *Professional Code* that began its definition of the archival mission by stating that “the archivist is responsible for ensuring the availability and use of permanently valuable archives...” (Harris 1997) A decade later, as one of the organisers of the “Archives at a Crossroads” conference and as one of the authors of the subsequent conference report, Harris identifies himself with statements regarding an archival system “under severe strain” and one which is in some instances “collapsing”. Here again, the “urgent need to facilitate ... access to the archive” was underlined. (Harris 2007: 1, 8, 10).

In order for the archives to be “accessed” or “used” there needs to be an awareness, an incentive and a need among the potential users to do so.

UPA – activated

Before turning to a discussion of the various initiatives which the University of Pretoria Archives (UPA) has taken over the past decade to position itself within the broader framework of the tertiary institution in which it is situated, and how it has made usage a priority, a brief overview of its origin will be presented. This in itself presents a scenario which we believe is not untypical of the place of archives in general, and could outline a reality which is shared by others in the archival division in the institutional realm.

Established as the “memory bank” of the University of Pretoria in 1994 (Anon 2005), the UPA was never regarded as a key concern in the broader university environment. On the contrary, it had taken almost two decades from when the idea to set up an archive was first suggested to the actual establishment. Its place and status within the broader frame work of the institution was limited, to say the least – a position that many archives at institutional, corporate, local, municipal and even higher levels share. It was, understandably not at the top of the priority list in terms of the institution’s mission nor did it feature as a major concern when it came to funding, facilities, staffing or location.

The forerunner of the University of Pretoria (UP), the Transvaal University College (TUC), was founded exactly a century ago, in 1908 and was granted university status in 1930. It was however only almost three quarters of a century later that any serious thought was given to the idea of establishing an archive. In 1978, the then Director of Library Services, Prof E.G. Gerryts, advocated that a university archives should be established. A committee was founded in that year, but was replaced a decade later with an ad hoc committee to investigate the possibility of establishing an archive. Although the top management of the university accepted the proposals set forth by the staff of the Department of History in principle, and in particular Prof Cobus Ferreira who was to be the first head of UPA, no funding was made available to realise these suggestions. In 1994 the Registrar, Prof C.R. de Beer, again raised the question of an archive and another task team was appointed to investigate the matter anew. Finally, on 13 September 1994 the UP executive adopted the

recommendations of the task team and the UPA was eventually established.

These were meagre beginnings: a storage level on the fifth level of the building was allocated as the repository-cum-reading room-cum offices of the UPA. While the windowless and very inaccessible position of this space were conducive to document storage and protection, it was by no means easily accessible to users nor beneficial to the health of those working there having no access to fresh air. As regards the human resources, the head of the archives was to be (and remains) half of a post of a full-time lecturer in the Department of History, while the archival assistant position started out as a part-time student contract post of a mere 20 hours per week. Given the infra-structural and human resource constraints, the comparatively slow pace of actually establishing an archive at an institution of this kind is perhaps indicative of the persistent perception and status of the archive.

However, as a result of a concerted effort to reposition the UPA within the broader University domain, along with the taking of opportunities that have either arisen or been created, much of this initial infrastructure, both in terms of physical and human resources has been altered. It is also in no small measure due to the commitment and drive of not only the staff, but also the support of the current Registrar, Prof Niek Grové, as the top management line manager. Today the UPA boasts a location in one of the oldest and most prestigious buildings on campus, the Old Arts building at the heart of the main campus. This includes a large reading room which has been restored to its turn of the previous century glory, two display areas, a work area as well as a intermediate repository (currently under construction) which is in closer proximity to the UPA reading room to house core collections. The initial storage area remains just that. While the head of archives post is still shared with the Department of History, two full-time assistant archivists have been appointed and there is a small allocation of funds out of which a couple of post-graduate students can be appointed annually on a contract basis.

In line with the generally accepted archival policies, the mission of the UPA is to “collect, arrange, describe, preserve and publicise information” about the University (Blais and Enns 1990-1991: 102; Anon

2005). Although the archives personnel have managed to collect records, including documents of the various academic and administrative departments, publications, photographs and objects dating back to the founding of the TUC, the relatively late establishment of the archives has resulted in a collection which is not as complete or comprehensive as one would desire. Therefore one of the main activities of the UPA staff is to promote an awareness among academic and administrative staff, students and alumni on the importance and role of the archives in order to attract and encourage the transfer of documents and other material.

In addition, the UPA is also faced with certain challenges, which influence the collection of material on campus. Firstly, one of most important and most frequently consulted UPA collections is its photographs that date back to the inception of the university in 1908. This collection was particularly enhanced for the period 1955-1980 due to the active involvement of the UP Public Relations Department which kept meticulous record of all events on campus in which they were involved. However, with the University rationalization process in the 1990's, many of the services on campus were outsourced, one of those being that of the official campus photographer. Thus, from the mid 1990's onwards this photographic record became very limited.

Secondly, the greater percentage of records, including the photographs, housed in UPA reflected an "official" version of campus life: top management decisions; administrative regulations; the academic departments; important top management events; graduations; official functions and staff members. If one considers that the university is actually student-centred, it is alarming to think that this important element of campus life was not adequately represented. As the "memory bank", it is very important that the archive is able to record a balanced and inclusive view of the university in its broadest sense in the archival collection.

In the third place, UP has experienced a dramatic increase in student numbers, especially over the past decade - an average annual growth of 14% (Anon 2006). Unfortunately, this increase has led to a perception among some students that they are merely a number in a big system and that their actions and achievements go unnoticed. Moreover, twenty years ago, with fewer numbers, student participa-

tion in campus activities was more “inclusive”. Now, the larger student body needs incentives to be enticed to participate in events. Besides apathy among a certain sector of the student body, there is also a general ignorance about the history and heritage of the university as well as the place and function of the archives.

Given these and other shortcomings the UPA made a concerted effort to become more visible, that is making the greater university community aware not only of its existence, but also its function and “user-ability”. The remainder of this article will consider some of the ways in which this has been achieved, specifically among the student body.

UPA – creating an awareness

From the outset it was glaringly apparent that the broader UP staff and student body were totally unaware of the existence, let alone the function, of the UPA. It was felt that in order for UPA to position itself and make its purpose evident it needed to create a visible and recognisable presence. All its activities were to carry an “identification” which would hopefully make people aware of its existence. In 1999 the newly appointed University Archivist, Prof K.L. Harris, decided to design a logo for UPA to represent the image of UPA – a kind of branding as it were. The logo, namely a bee within a honey cell was approved for use on internal communication as well as in exhibitions and displays presented by UPA.

It was important that this logo or identity would emphasize the integral place of UPA within the broader University, but at the same time imply its functionality. The symbol of the bee was taken from the coat of arms of UP, where the Dexter head contains three bees on a red field. This had in turn been taken from the original coat of arms of Pretoria, indicating UP’s connected place within the broader metropole. On both the coats of arms, the bee symbolizes “activity”, especially gathering or collecting, which was perfectly applicable to one of UPA’s core functions, namely the active gathering of information. The honey cell which encases the bee symbolizes “safe keeping”, as UPA serves as a place of preservation and protection of the history of UP. On a lighter note, one could venture to add that the bee has a sting

with the implication – “be kind to the archivist or she might delete you from history”!

Another avenue which has proved effective in creating an awareness of the function of UPA and the nature of its holdings is the regular mounting of exhibits across the campus. The aim is not only to make staff, students and visitors aware of the rich history of the university, but also to showcase the type of material UPA collects and stores. These exhibitions do by no means merely portray an “official history” of UP, but where viable and appropriate tell untold stories of the wide range of people, activities and aspects related to the every day life on campus. Exhibitions are mounted at various times for a range occasions on both a temporary and permanent basis.

The start of the academic year brings both an influx of new students as well as alumni and other visitors to the campus. Each year UPA sets up a photographic display which presents an overview of the university’s history by showcasing campus life: from the buildings and architecture, academic life to student activities, such as student council elections, sport, residences and rag. The display is also clearly marked with a UPA logo and has an indication of its physical location and contact details on campus. The exhibition is mounted in glass-encased notice boards that are usually used for the display of academic results and are strategically located outside the main library and near an ATM. The location is ideal in that there is a continually large traffic of both students and staff in the vicinity. Judging from the number of people who stop to view this exhibition, as well as the first time visitors to the archives, including students, who have indicated that they became aware of its existence through this exhibition, this is undoubtedly an effective way of creating an awareness of the archives.

An example of a more permanent exhibition is a photographic display in the foyer of the offices of top management entitled “Landscapes and Portraits”. This exhibit deviates from the traditional line-up of photographs of the leaders of the institution by giving a distinct sense of time and change through the physical and human dimension of campus. The one half of the exhibition space, “Landscapes”, depicts the physical development of campus. Each frame contains three photographs of a particular building from its initial construction

through to its current state showing how the buildings and environment have changed over the past century. The other half of the exhibition, "Portraits" contains photographs of "nameless" students taken over the past ten decades. The fashion and activities reflect the changing composition of the student body, while at the same time placing them central to the university's image. Again, while on the one hand giving a sense of the heritage and history of the University to staff, student and visitor who move through the area, the UPA existence is foregrounded as both the logo and contact details are made available on small flyers at the exhibit.

Other UPA exhibitions that are presented throughout the year are either initiated by archival staff as occasions arise, or are requested by academic and administrative staff, as well as students for particular events. Such exhibits include the commemoration of a particular anniversary of a student residence or organization; the celebration of a Faculty milestone such as the Engineering Faculty jubilee; the opening of a new institute such as the Gender centre or a special occasion such as the *Perdeby* (student newspaper) reunion.

Thus by creating an awareness through a "visual" identity and "tangible" exhibits, the UPA believes it has become more evident in the broader university "public eye", and in particular, among the student body. The increase in enquiries and visits to the archives by both students and staff makes this phenomenon apparent.

UPA – providing an incentive

Given the general apathy of engaging in the history and heritage of UP among the diverse student body, not to mention making contact with the UPA, a number of projects have been devised so as to create an opportunity for students to interact with the archives. It is important to note that these are not merely to lure the students into UPA and make them aware of its activities, but are also mutually beneficial endeavours both in terms of the students and UPA's functioning. The photographic workshops and competition, residence archives project and scrapbook initiative are examples of this strategy all aimed at creating an awareness of the archives on campus, but also to provide and impart certain skills - some of which are related to the archives - to the students who participate in these activities.

First launched in 2000, the photographic workshops and competition are run with the generous sponsorship from a local photographic business and supplier, Q-Photo and Fujifilm. The aim of the photographic project is not only to augment the photographic collection of the UPA in the light of the abovementioned absence of an official university photographer, but to add a specifically student-centred dimension to this collection. It also has the additional spin-off of cultivating an awareness on campus of the need to preserve UP's past as well as the existence and function of the UPA, while at the same time imparting valuable photographic skills to student participants.

The popularity and enthusiasm of this project among the students from faculties ranging from engineering to veterinary science to commerce has made it an annual event and highlight on the UP student calendar. A series of four workshops are presented throughout the year by professional photographers Derek and Norma Pearman who specialise in macro-photography. The students receive film or CDs, hand-outs, lectures and practical presentations, as well as individual guidance pertaining to their particular camera – all free of charge. Students are then required to complete a project, specifically designed to enable them to master a particular technique, but at the same time set out to reflect a selected aspect of campus life required by UPA photographic holdings. These include buildings, academic life, sport, student life and residents. After each workshop the students hand in their film or CD at UPA. These are developed free of charge and each participating student receives a personal critique on the photographs submitted. At the end of the course the students also receive certificates of attendance if they complete all four assignments. In addition, they stand the chance of winning vouchers for the assignment photographs submitted after each workshop and then also a chance of winning the overall grand prize.

While students are given their photographs, they agree to UPA holding the copyright and using them with due acknowledgement. The photographs are kept in a separate collection that already totals over 2 000 – and reflect a very creative and student centred array. These are not only used by the UPA in exhibitions, but in many other official university publications, such as the *University Yearbook*, *Research Reports*, programmes, student newspapers, conference

covers and other commemorative books and are also made accessible to the broader media and public.

The residence archives and scrapbook project is another initiative which uses incentives which relate directly to the student on campus and bring them into closer cooperation with UPA. UP has a total of 21 student residences, which form an integral part of campus life and house a large percentage of the student body. Through the enquiries received, the personnel of the UPA have realized that even though many residences have some record of the past, they often neglect to record events. For that reason, UPA decided to launch a residence scrapbook project. The aim of the project is to encourage the students to preserve a record of the current year's activities. This project has been launched with the co-operation of the Student Representative Council, which means that the residences receive cultural points for their participation. Annually the various residences on campus compete according to a system of accreditation on different levels, such as rag, academic achievement, sport and cultural activities. For the purposes of this, the students are expected to compile a "record" in the form of a scrapbook in which the events and the everyday life of their residence in that particular year are captured. Although creativity and originality are considered in adjudicating these scrapbooks, the main criteria are in the first place that all the inhabitants of the specific residence must be able to identify with the contents of the scrapbook. And secondly, the ease of use and durability of the scrapbook is important, as the aim is to give the current and future students an overview of what life in their residence is all about. In addition, points are also awarded for the way in which the previous scrapbooks are preserved and made available.

The archives section of this residence project aims at giving students the incentive to preserve any other records relevant to their particular residence. Archives staff member, Ria van der Merwe, visits the residences to give advice on setting up an archives, organising and inventorising material often in limited space and with limited resources. Criteria for judging the archives include the lay-out of the archives, namely how the students plan and work with the space available; the continuity, namely how easily the person responsible for the archives the following year will take over the filing and administration; the completeness of filing system (minutes of meetings,

regulations etc); the accessibility of the room and lastly how the tangible history of the residence is preserved for generations to come. The residences which comply with these criteria are annually awarded a “BEE of Archival Excellence” certificate in recognition of this achievement.

The enthusiasm with which students engage in these various projects is most rewarding and has the additional advantage of them “discovering” the archives and what it does. There is also a surprisingly positive reaction to the material they encounter when actually visiting the UPA reading room, albeit to submit film or obtain information for their residence scrapbook.

UPA – facilitating a need

As an academic institution, the UPA has the added advantage of being able to cooperate with and tap into the teaching dimension of various departments. This is however not limited to disciplines like history and cultural history where historical research skills and archival work are integral to the subject, but, through various initiatives, have been spread to involve other departments where these skills are less germane.

Students in the Department of Historical and Heritage Studies (History) which offers four different disciplines are given projects which they need to complete in the UPA. Before they start their research projects, the students receive a hands-on session presented by archival assistant Bronwyn Strydom on doing research in the archives, the various available types of sources and the manner in which these may be used and acknowledged. In the case of Cultural History, students are expected to produce an assignment on campus architecture, while the Heritage and Cultural Tourism students use the information obtained in the archives to plan and produce tours on campus. The Museum Science course involves a museums and archives component which is presented by Ria van der Merwe. Postgraduate students in all four disciplines also make use of the UPA holdings to complete their honours assignments and mini-dissertations.

Another department that makes extensive use of the UPA collection is Architecture. Since its inception the archives has been consulted by both under- and postgraduate students on specific tasks associated with the UP built environment. This year the UPA has been extensively involved in the Masters Degree programme where students have had to research the existing campus structure and its history to create a projected futuristic dimension.

One of the most exciting recent additions to the list of academic departments involved with the UPA in their teaching programmes is the Department of Visual Arts. As part of their portfolio, the final year Information Design students are required to provide a product which complies with a particular client's needs. In this case the UPA "acted" as the client and the brief they received was to produce an audio-visual digital presentation that would celebrate the university's centenary. The target audience was very wide, namely all visitors to the university during its centenary year, which includes prospective, current and past students, staff, international guests and the general public. With the assistance of the UPA staff, the students were given access to a wide range of archival material including documents, photographs, publications and artefacts and within three weeks they had to research, design, animate and edit a motion piece.

Over the past three years, the results produced by the students have been nothing short of brilliant. Testifying to this unbelievable creativity is the very positive and complimentary feedback from visitors, as well as the comment by the current Registrar, Prof Niek Grové, that "no one over 30 could have produced this". The success of this project led to additional financial support to obtain a dedicated room where these and other visual material could be screened. The archives staff worked tirelessly to recreate a room which has been restored to what the first classrooms looked like with old wooden tables and chairs, but equipped with state of the art equipment to show the students' presentations. The "Virtual classroom" in the Old Arts Building has proven to be a great draw card to UPA and its activities. Thus not only has UPA benefited from this project, but the students have indicated how they have gained from the exposure and, experience, as well as the gratification of doing a project that is actually used.

By creating an awareness, providing incentives and facilitating a need, the UPA has been able to directly interact with a wide spectrum of the university student body. This has made the archives accessible to students who might otherwise never have encountered it or its holdings, and has created an awareness of its place, its function and its expertise well beyond the confines of its traditional core function. Moreover, the UP archivists have become active partners in a range of student related activities, both of an academic and more informal nature, which has radically altered many preconceived ideas. In the longer term it is hoped and believed that the awareness imparted to these students by interaction with UPA, will have given them a sense of the function of the archive in general and an appreciation of the need to preserve the past for posterity which they will take with them as they move beyond the boundaries of the university.

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