

Museum
Leuven



SIX YEARS OF 'THE ART BRIDGE'

Mater Dei and M look back on a special project



TABLE OF CONTENTS

5	Acknowledgements
7	1. Introduction
11	2. Main objective of the project
13	3. Progress
13	3.1 Key stage 1: working on self-awareness and self-confidence in the museum
14	3.2 Key stage 2: working on relational connectedness and interaction with peers
24	3.4 Teachers, M staff and management
27	4. UC Leuven-Limburgresearch
27	4.1 Structure and methodology
27	4.2 Results
30	4.3 Critical success factors
32	4.4 Conclusion
35	5. Decision:Observations and learning from Mater Dei and M
38	sources



Acknowledgements

Zes jaar 'De Kunstbrug'

ACKNOWLEDGE- MENTS

Our story began seven years ago at a study day in Leuven with a special meeting between M and Mater Dei. On that day, we forged the first plans to work together long-term, with art and creativity as connecting factors. That planted the seed for the 'The Art Bridge' project. The school and the museum then submitted a project proposal to the Queen Paola Foundation. The latter approved the project and that was the beginning of a great adventure.

Meanwhile, together - pupils, teachers and museum staff - we have experienced and realised a lot. We recounted great stories and made wonderful memories. This would have been impossible without the enthusiasm and help of countless people.

First of all, we would like to thank all pupils, parents, teachers, management and board members of Mater Dei primary school Leuven. Thanks also to the entire team, the management and board members at M and at UC Leuven-Limburg. Many thanks too to the M-cenassen, the donors of M-LIFE and Kiwanis club Artemis Leuven, and of course to the passionate team of the Queen Paola Foundation.

Finally, a special mention to the inspirers and facilitators of this project: Bricol'art, Chris Heughebaert, Conny Feyaerts, Charlotte Van Peer, Dorine De Vos, Evy Raes, Isabel Lowyck, Lore Baeyens, Katrien Goossens, Katrien Oosterlinck, Marlies Verreydt, Peter Bary, Sofie Vermeiren and Stasha Long. Thank you all very much!

The team of 'The Art Bridge'



1. INTRODUCTION

"To us, the museum is like a great home. I still want to go there." (A Year 1 pupil at Mater Dei)

In 2016, M and the Mater Dei primary school¹ in Leuven joined forces and started a long-term collaboration. The project was named 'The Art Bridge' and ran for six years. It came about thanks to the support of the Queen Paola Foundation and M-LIFE.

At both Mater Dei and M, we believe in the power of art. Art can offer you a new perspective on yourself, others and the world. It was thus not illogical that we ended up working on this project together. That is what the name means, by the way: 'The Art Bridge' aims to build bridges between our two houses.

Mater Dei is a very diverse school. They see that as a strength, not an obstacle. The school is very committed to artistic education - image, drama, music, movement - and see that it as an engine for language stimulation. That's where M was keen to step in. The museum was a safe haven for the pupils, but also a creative place where they could explore.

M is very committed to visual literacy, a method that works well with the school's vision. The idea is that you learn to look at images and their surroundings in a different and better way. For many pupils, starting from art makes it more approachable. There is then less focus on the language, which they often find harder. That way of working also emphasises interaction more than pure knowledge transfer, which is very important in child development.

Like many projects, 'The Art Bridge' was a story of

¹ Primary School in Belgium is divided in 6 years over three stages. In this publication we use the Belgian classification:

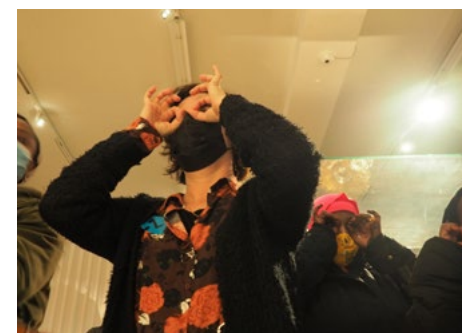
- First stage: Year 1 and 2 (6 – 8 years)
- Second stage: Year 3 and 4 (8 – 10 years)
- Third stage: Year 5 and 6: (10 – 12 years)

trial and error and making adjustments. In the process, we learned a lot from each other. At the centre were Conny Feyaerts, third-year teacher at Mater Dei, and Charlotte Van Peer, mediator at M. Together, they built a bridge between the museum and the school and laid the foundations for a lasting collaboration.

All pupils and teachers at Mater Dei, from first to sixth grade, took part in the project. They participated in workshops with artists at the museum or at school. They were also involved in making exhibitions available to the public: for example, they made videos or tested out a new tour for schools. Moreover, Mater Dei's teachers could go to M to teach.

During the 2018-2019 academic year, a researcher from UCLL followed the project. Her research found that 'The Art Bridge' "has had a positive impact on children's attitudes towards art, on children's self-confidence and has given children a greater understanding of the importance of working with peers".² The collaboration between the school and the museum makes the children feel special, even unique. They describe M as a special, welcoming place, outside the school walls.

² Goossens K., *Empowering children through the museum context*, Leuven, 2019, unpublished research





2. Main objective of the project

Six years of 'The Art Bridge'

2. MAIN OBJECTIVE OF THE PROJECT¹

'The Art Bridge' had one main goal, to strengthen the social integration of children in a highly diverse school. Within that main goal, there were three medium-term objectives.

The first objective was about pupils. The project wanted to 'empower' them, starting from their own experience and perception. From there, they were step-by-step taught a few important skills – looking and thinking critically, being creative, viewing art better and more intensely, communicating in different languages, practising social skills, boosting self-confidence.

The second objective concerned teachers. The project aimed to make them aware of the importance of art and culture, and to support and enthuse them to work on it in a museum context.

The third objective was about the museum itself. The project aimed to bring museum operations outside of the walls of M, making meaningful connections between the school, the museum, the city and the community.

¹ A project group, consisting of Conny Feyaerts (Mater Dei), Katrien Goossens (UCLL) and Sofie Vermeiren (M Leuven), under the guidance of Goedroen Juchtmans (KU Leuven for the Queen Paola Foundation), came up with a plan of action where the various objectives were elaborated. They did so using the 'Theory of Change'. The text below comes from this plan of action, drawn up by the project group and written out by Katrien Goossens, *Theory of Change: De Kunstbrug*, Leuven, 2017, internal document



3. PROGRESS

Below is an overview of the activities that M and Mater Dei worked out together over the past six academic years. They are linked to the three primary school key stages and the objectives for each key stage.¹

3.1 KEY STAGE 1: WORKING ON SELF-AWARENESS AND SELF-CONFIDENCE IN THE MUSEUM

In Key stage 1, pupils had interactive tours and workshops at the museum. This introduced them to art and taught them to look more closely at images. They also got to work themselves in the M studio. All these activities started from the model of visual literacy that M has developed in collaboration with the Envil network (European Visual Literacy Network). This approach, which primarily appeals to pupils' senses and emotions, makes them remember more of their museum visit. Looking at art brings pleasure to children and stimulates their imagination. Being actively involved also gives them many opportunities to express their own opinions, thoughts and feelings. This, in turn, makes them more self-confident.

In the second semester, Year 1 pupils were also given guided tours by the Year 6 kids who had been given special training as guides for this. Those same Year 1 and 6 pupils were already linked at school as reading buddies² and so they already had a special bond.

¹ This is also described in the project plan *Theory of Change: De Kunstbrug*, Leuven, 2017, internal document

² Reading buddies: All Year 6 pupils are assigned a Year 1 pupil to help them develop their reading skills. This creates a special bond between the pupils and also grows the Year 6 pupils a sense of responsibility.

3.2 KEY STAGE 2: WORKING ON RELATIONAL CONNECTEDNESS AND INTERACTION WITH PEERS

The pupils from Key stage 2 worked with an *artist in residence*. During project days, they completely immersed themselves in M's museum work and were introduced to not only visual art, but also photography, dance and music. What they did varied from year to year.

During these project days, the children collaborated with each other in workshops. That was a place where they could share their thoughts and feelings with peers and learn to express their opinions to each other. There was a focus not only on non-linguistic skills (perceiving and imagining), but also on linguistic skills (writing, speaking and listening). Art proved to be an excellent way to stimulate, challenge and excite the child's brain. It was also striking how perceptive the children were to details and how fascinated they were by the stories behind the artworks. Afterwards, they often remembered many details and facts.

Academic year 2016-2017 & 2017-2018

We worked with photographer Evy Raes for the first two project years. She taught photography workshops to third-year pupils during the 2016-2017 academic year. Based on viewing assignments, they learned how to take photographs with focus and were introduced to different imaging techniques. They then participated in workshops, where they took 'memory photos'. Many of these students have few, if any, photographs from their own past, often because they have had to flee their home countries, or because taking photographs is less common in their home culture. Evy and Conny reminisced with them, which the students then staged and photographed. The photos were then cut

up and collaged. That way, the photographs would not be literal memories, but rather personal and creative interpretations.

A year later, during the 2017-2018 academic year, those same children - now in Year 4 - worked further with Evy on the memory photos. They imagined what (a detail from) their neighbourhood might look like in the future. They took photos of that place and edited them using mixed media. Twelve unique artworks were created that way. From these, we made pavement stickers which then formed an art trail through Leuven, from Sint-Jacobsplein to the Vaart. The photos were also turned into a booklet with tips and explanations about the neighbourhood by the children themselves.

The Year 4 pupils were also given a tour of M's depot, where they saw works of art that tell something about the history of the area around Mater Dei. This helped them to get to know their school environment better.

The photos, booklet, pavement stickers and commemorative photos were displayed during the and festival in the form of a pop-up museum. The children also explained their work in videos, which visitors could download via a QR code. After the festival, the children continued working with Evy Raes around photography in the school environment.



Academic year 2018-2019 & 2019-2020

For the next two project years, the Year 3 pupils worked with participatory theatre maker Katrien Oosterlinck. They took part in four workshops, working on relational connection and interaction through movement and dance. The project was linked to Pieter Vermeersch's exhibition (2018-2019) and the collection presentation 'The Language of the Body' (2019-2020).

The workshops were filmed by video artist Alda Snoppek. She encouraged the children to show themselves to the camera and to each other. They also interacted with the works of art in the museum with gestures or dance movements rather than with words. That meant that they experienced it with all their senses.

During project days in M, Year 4 pupils were immersed in the work of the museum. In the 2018-2019 academic year, we worked together with child psychiatrist Griet Dupont, author of the children's book 'De reis van Dobedo en van de arend met hoogtevrees'³ and which was the common thread during the project week. The figure Dobedo helped the children search for their identity and mental strength. This was a way for them to discover their talents and those of others in a playful way. On the last day of the project week, they displayed their talents in M to parents, classmates, family and museum staff. Some danced, played the piano or sang a song, others performed a stage or circus act.

Project days were scheduled in the second semester of the 2019-2020 academic year for Year 4 but the Covid-19 pandemic meant that these unfortunately could not take place.



3 Griet Dupont and Peter Verhelst, *The journey of Dobedo and of the eagle with vertigo*, Lannoo publishing house, Tiel, 2017



Academic year 2020-2021 & 2021-2022

The activities planned for Year 3 and Year 4 in the 2020-2021 academic year also had to be cancelled unfortunately.

We picked up where we left off in the 2021-2022 academic year. This time, the Year 3 pupils collaborated with Bricol'art, an artists' collective. With four workshops, they focused on the interaction between images and music. The project was linked to Wael Shawky's exhibition, which included marionettes. Together with the facilitators, the pupils made their own puppets in small groups with clay and fabric. They created a musical short story modelled on Wael Shawky's film, which is on show in the exhibition. As in that film, music was very important in setting the mood of the story. At the end, each group presented a puppet show to the rest of the class. Those performances were captured in short films.

Over two project days, the Year 4 pupils got up close and personal with M museum. Among other things, they paid an exclusive visit to the museum depot, where they were given a guided tour by M's head of collections. They also visited St Peter's Church for a digital experience on the iPad. They discovered ins and outs of how the museum works and made connections with their own lives and living environments.

3. Progress

Six years of 'The Art Bridge'

3.3 Key stage 3: participation and connection with museum context

The Year 6 pupils were given training as guides. Afterwards, they gave their own guided tour to their parents, peers, Year 1 pupils and museum staff. They proved that even outside school walls, they dared to be confident and assured in front of both people they knew and strangers.

The guide training consisted of several workshops, where pupils were introduced to guide techniques and encouraged to say something about a work of art using their own talents. Some wrote a play or a poem, others engaged in dialogue with their audience through questions. During the training - and more generally throughout the project - we noticed that children look at art spontaneously and directly. They often make associations with their own lives and make references to that when guiding. They describe the works in a profound and detailed manner. Their way of looking, feeling and thinking was a source of inspiration for both teachers and museum staff. At the end of the training, once they had done their tour, the pupils were given a guide's certificate by the director and chair of M so that they would feel valued. Some even asked if their guide diploma would allow them to work in M later on!



3.4 TEACHERS, M STAFF AND MANAGEMENT

One of the aims of 'The Art Bridge' was to sensitise, support and enthuse the teachers at Mater Dei to engage with art and culture at the museum. This allowed them to work on empowering their pupils.

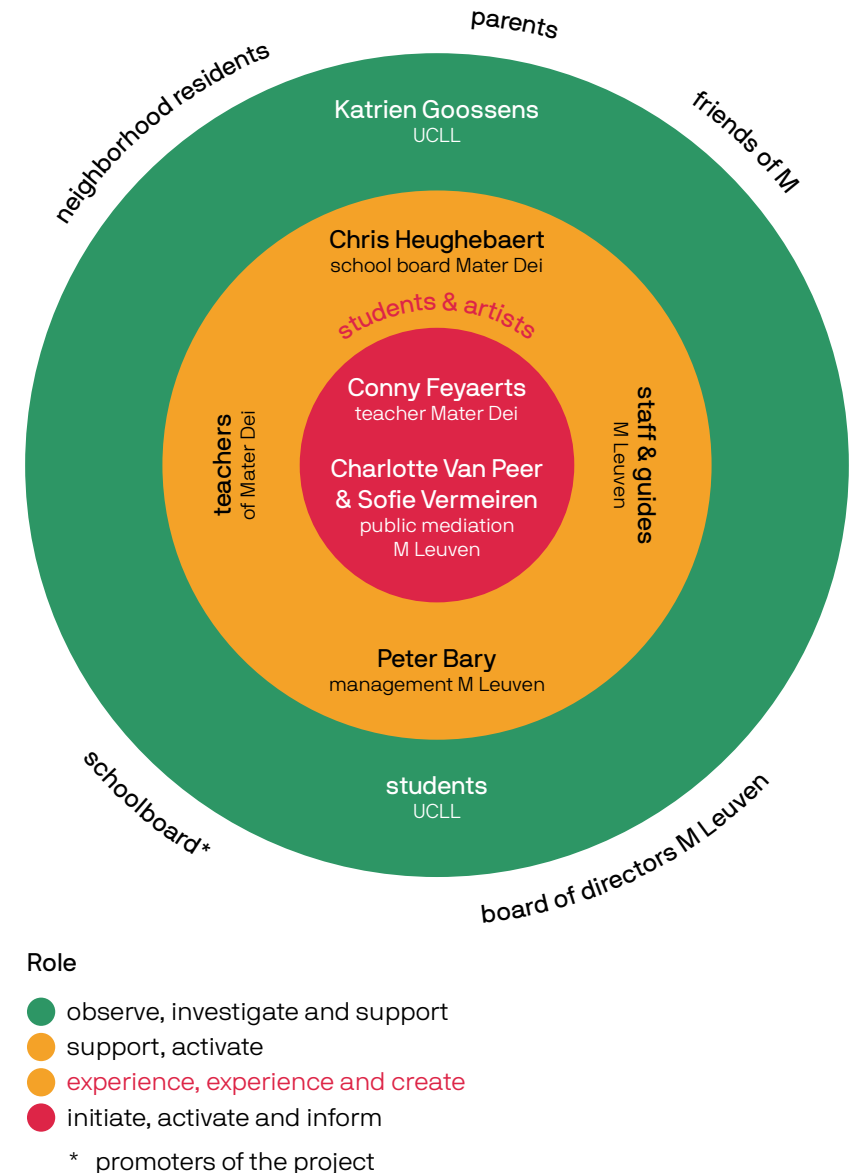
Teachers regularly took their classes to M and discovered the collection and exhibitions, and supervising creative workshops that would otherwise have taken place within the school walls. The context of the museum was inspiring with its spaces, artworks and materials that invited people to be creative themselves.

One of the teacher, Conny Feytaerts, spent one day a week working at M. She then accompanied the children and her colleagues on their museum visits. She also advised the museum around public outreach for schools and worked with M to come up with a tailor-made offer. Conny also played a mediating role at school. She informed her colleagues about M's offerings and got them excited about the ongoing exhibitions and 'The Art Bridge'.

Teachers also engaged with M's offerings in the classroom. A 'mindswitch' could be noticed over the course of the project where teachers evolved from 'interested in art' to 'art-loving'. This made creative development even more part of the school's DNA.

At M, Charlotte Van Peer (mediation collaborator) and Sofie Vermeiren (head of the mediation department) worked closely with Conny and with the other teachers at Mater Dei to set up all the activities. They exchanged many experiences, strengthening the bond between the two houses.

The support from the management and the Boards of both M and the school and by the education department of the city of Leuven also helped make the project a success. The pupil's parents were also involved in 'The Art Bridge'. A network circle offers an overview over how the cooperation was structured.





4. UC LEUVEN-LIMBURG RESEARCH¹

4.1 STRUCTURE AND METHODOLOGY

Researcher Katrien Goossens (UCLL) followed 'The Art Bridge' closely during the 2016-2019 academic years. She observed the children, teachers and museum guides and carried out focused discussions with them. Along the way, a lot of positive things emerged as well as things that could be done better. In the 2018-2019 academic year, she conducted a more in-depth theory-based impact evaluation. This looked at the extent to which the predefined goals had been achieved and what factors influenced any changes in the children.

4.2 RESULTS

Positive attitude towards art

The children have become positive about art. This was evident from how engaged they were during the museum visits and workshops. They adopted an active listening attitude and asked many questions to the guides and teachers. During the focus discussions, all children said that art had become more meaningful to them thanks to the project. They pointed, for example,

¹ Goossens K. (2019), *Het versterken van de empowerment van kinderen door de museale context*, Leuven, 2019, unpublished research

to the freedom art gives you to let your own imagination work, and the fact that you can learn something from art. Interestingly, the children were very interested in the social and historical context of the works. They also mentioned that they appreciate art more the more they come into contact with it.

"You like the paintings more when you go to the museum more. Every time I go back, I like the paintings even more." (Key stage 1 pupil)

Feeling confident

The second- and third-grade children followed a longer route accompanied by a guide or artist. They say this made them feel positive about themselves and made them feel more confident.

"It feels ... as if you're a bit old. 'Like being a leader. And that is great. The first time that I felt that in myself was there (at the museum)." (Key stage 2 pupil)

They take that feeling with them in their daily lives. One of the things they said was that they dare to show more of themselves to others.

"I used to say something and would be scared that people would laugh. That would then make me embarrassed. Now I don't mind that so much. I know I can do it now." (Key stage 3 pupil)

The children also that classmates who - as they themselves pointed out - were going through a difficult journey also became more confident.

"X (a classmate) is often very negative, but when she looks deep inside herself, she knows she can do it. I saw that." (Key stage 3 pupil)

The warm, open attitude and positive affirmation by the artist or guide created a safe environment. It made that the children felt accepted and that meant that they dared to show themselves.

"I dare to say things in my own language now. For me, it was the first time, there with K. (supervisor), that I did that... Before, I was too scared to say things in my own language about my country, Ethiopia to someone else. I say things now to my friends." (Key stage 2 pupil)

That children said that they became more confident also had to do with being able to show themselves in front of a camera or a live audience. At first, this made all of the children a bit more tensed. But precisely because they it empowers them, those moments grew into a personal victory. That, in turn, reinforced their self-assurance.

Learning to cooperate with others

In the workshops for key stages 2 and 3, the children worked together in heterogeneous groups. Learning to work together, playing together with children they often had not played with before and getting support from the other children in their group when it was their turn to be a guide were experiences they remembered, and which were valuable for their daily lives.

"I learned to play with other children too, not just the same ones all the time. I almost never play in groups, but at Museum M I also played with others. I didn't expect that." (Key stage 3 pupil)

4.3 CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

The study found that both the museum context and the input from the artist, guide or art educator were determinants of the children's positive experiences.

The museum context

The link children made between the project and the museum ran like a thread through their stories. They all knew, for example, that their school was working with the museum. They themselves also mentioned the role that Miss Conny, the teacher *in residence*, played.

"Miss Conny works there, at the museum, and she is also a guide there. Sometimes she can arrange things for us." (Key stage 3 pupil)

The analysis shows that the children feel special and unique because of their school's collaboration with the museum.

"This is very special because not many schools can do this. We are the only ones allowed to do this." (Key stage 2 pupil)

The survey shows that children find the museum a special place and to them, it has a special status. But that did not make them hesitant to come here, nor avoiding it all together. They see the museum as an accessible place, where they felt at home and had a positive experience. They are, each in their own way, proud of what they have achieved.

"We will come back with the whole family and I will be the guide. Later I also go back with my own children, to tell them that this is the museum, and this is where I got my guide diploma." (Key stage 3 pupil)

The role of the supervisor

When the children talk about the museum, they often make the link with the guides and art educators. They all remember the first name of the guide, artist or art educator and they spontaneously talk about what they learned from them.

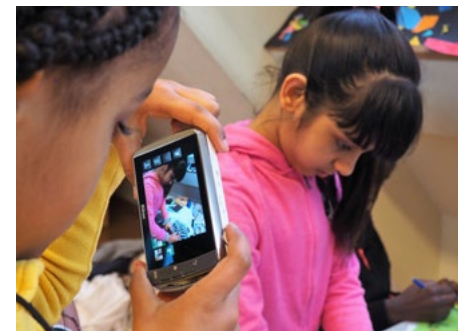
The workshops offered a warm and safe atmosphere. This was due to the open attitude of the facilitators, their individual moments with children who found focusing a bit more difficult, and the way they positively affirmed the children. During the focus discussions, the children spoke particularly warmly about the movement workshop facilitator: they mentioned her first name very frequently when sharing their experiences, and also said things like: *"I often think back to K."*

4.4 CONCLUSION

This qualitative research shows that 'The Art Bridge' has had a positive impact on children's attitudes towards art and their self-confidence. It has also given them a better understanding of the importance of working finely with peers.

On average, class groups spent eight hours with 'The Art Bridge' but the project was still significant to their daily lives. Thus, during the focus discussions, the children easily bridged the gap between their experience in the museum and their wider world of life themselves in each case.

Our conclusion is then that the collaboration with M contributed strongly to achieving objectives such as working on self-assurance, learning to work together and a positive attitude towards art.





5. Decision: Observations and learning from Mater Dei and M

Six years of 'The Art Bridge'

5. DECISION: OBSERVATIONS AND LEARNING FROM MATER DEI AND M

Observations by teachers and museum staff have shown that thanks to 'The Art Bridge', the children have learned to look more closely and critically at art and, more broadly, at images in their immediate environment. They learned to express themselves in different ways, which in turn sharpened their language skills. By looking at and talking about art together, the children learned to explain what they feel and think about the artworks in an informed way.

The children also learned a lot by *doing*. Many activities in the museum were *hands-on* and focused on interaction, play and physical learning. For example, during tours, pupils were given the task of drawing or depicting something, or linking a musical excerpt to an artwork. Assignments like those brought them closer to the core of the work, taught them about techniques and materials as well as taught them how to express themselves creatively.

Interviews with teachers revealed that they learned how art can enrich and broaden their own lifeworld. They really want to pass that on to their pupils. They have become aware that - in a world that is constantly changing - art, creativity and culture are as important as maths and language. At the same time, they have discovered that the museum can be a place where

they can work on their pupils' maths and geometry skills. Concepts such as perspective, floor plan, routes, size and shape can be explained concretely using works of art, for example.

'The Arts Bridge' also made it clear to teachers that you don't have to be an expert in arts and culture to hone your pupils' musical skills. The project also made them dare to guide their class around M themselves. The museum staff and guides taught them how to look at, think about and talk about the works with the children in an interactive way. A lesson can take place as much in the museum rooms as in the classroom. Visiting M adds an extra dimension to teaching. It awakens something in children and stimulates their creativity.

Teachers were able to collaborate with museum staff and contemporary artists which made art more accessible to them too. Moreover, they were given tools to switch from visual arts to other artistic domains, such as dance, music and drama. This allowed them to integrate those domains into one.

They also indicated that the artistic activities meant that they got to know their pupils in a different way - the teachers too saw the pupils' well-being and self-assurance grow. The way children see, feel and think was an inspiration to teachers, museum staff and guides, and more widely to parents. They all learned from each other. That is what made the project so valuable.

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