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The Espy (Hotel Esplanade), 11 The Esplanade, St Kilda

Just in time for the opening of the rail connection to St Kilda in 1857, the New Bath Hotel opened in that year on this site. Its orientation facing the beach and its name referring also to that English Eighteenth Century resort town *par excellence* both evoked pleasure. Bath in Somerset was a fashionable hot springs spa for almost two thousand years, the first resort attractive for social *élan* rather than just for health: it was social pleasure personified.

St Kilda's New (bathing) Bath was not to open for another three years. But the owner of the new hotel, the Honourable James Stewart Johnston co-owner of the *Argus* newspaper (1843-52) and sometimes its acting manager, MLC for St Kilda, alderman of the City of Melbourne and councillor of the Shire of Bulla, was not going to wait around. It had 22 bedrooms, six sitting rooms and a bar, surrounded by over a hectare of formal gardens: 'tea gardens, to which will be added two bowling alleys upon the American principle, a large quoiting ground, throwing the hammer and a



Esplanade Hotel in 1881 showing the three former terraced houses.

variety of other amusements.' It was known for the quality of its food and its genteel patrons.

That November the New Bath Hotel hosted an exhibition for the St Kilda Horticultural Society, including 'choice specimens of geraniums, fuchsias and pansies,' and the 40th Regiment military band played music. Perhaps the *Argus's* report is the first ever of a musical performance at The Esplanade, over 150 years ago.

In 1861, the licence was transferred to Charles Wedel & Moss and the New Bath became the Criterion. In 1864, Johnston sold the hotel to John Duerdin who also acquired a house adjacent. Three years later, both buildings were demolished and the hotel site lay vacant for ten years, known as the Criterion's paddock.

In 1874, the site was sold to the Honourable James Orkney, MLA for West Melbourne and owner of other Melbourne hotels, leader of Scots' Church (no temperance problem there!) and founding member of the Melbourne Harbour Trust. In 1877, he commissioned the architects Smith and Johnson to design a new brick residential terrace for the site, to be known as the Esplanade. It is quite possible that the hotel's floor plan could have accommodated three very substantial terraced houses, facing the sea.

Orkney changed his mind (thank goodness!) and The Esplanade became a 60-roomed hotel, completed in 1878. He owned all of the land between Pollington and Victoria Streets, including his Italianate villa Orcadia and the licensee's house in Victoria Street. The elevated Italianate three-storied building has a 14-bay façade, ending in full-height four-bay canted bay windows; its ground and first floor windows are round-headed, first and second floor have segmental heads. There is a four-bay double-storied entry verandah with cast-iron stanchions, lace friezes and brackets, between the single-storied wing-walls that divided the former terraced houses and stairs descend from what would have been the four entries (now altered).

The architects, Alfred Louis Smith (c1830-1907) and Arthur Ebdon Johnson (c1823-95) were Londoners who had each worked for important English designers: Smith for the designing builder Thomas Cubitt and Johnson for the fine architect Philip Hardwick. Johnson was talented and won the Soane medal and a Royal Institute of British Architects prize. He advanced in Melbourne due to the patronage of his uncle, the pastoralist Charles Ebdon.

Smith and Johnson met whilst working in the Colonial Architect's Department and together designed many major public buildings in Melbourne (several now demolished), including the General Post Office (1859-67, now GPO), the Supreme Court (1874-84), the Melbourne Athenæum (1885-86) and Eastern Hill Fire Station (1892-93). In 1856, with T J Crouch (44), they were founders of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects.

The first publican and lessee of The Esplanade Hotel was James Grant Hay, who also owned the Athenaeum Club in Melbourne. An advertisement placed with The Victorian Railways in 1885, boasted that two of the manufacturer Alcock's best tables resided in the Esplanade's billiard room.

Mark Twain visited Melbourne in the 1880s and is said to have stayed at the Esplanade under his real name, Samuel Clements. In 1888, Sigismund Jacoby became the lessee and was Mayor of St Kilda in 1892-94 and 1908-09. Jacoby Reserve, bounded by Park, Deakin and Cowderoy Streets and Park Lane in St Kilda West, is the former Sigismund Jacoby Memorial Playground for Children, which he donated to the people of St Kilda and towards which he extracted a £1 donation from childless Alfred Felton.

Felton (1831-1904) an industrial chemist and philanthropist, the Esplanade's most famous resident, came to live at there in 1892 and died there in 1904. Born in Maldon in Essex, Felton arrived in the colony in 1853, the same year as Moritz Michaelis (8). He founded at least two great Australian businesses: ACI and Drug Houses of Australia. In 1867 with Frederick Sheppard

Grimwade, he formed the wholesale druggist company Felton, Grimwade and Company (1867-1930). This partnership which lasted 50 years, created Drug Houses of Australia (1930-74, Felton Grimwade & Bickfords Pty Ltd from 1974). Another Felton venture, Melbourne Glass Bottle Works (1872-c1915), later evolved into Australian Glass Manufacturers, which became Australian Consolidated Industries (ACI, c1916-2006) and is now the ACI Packaging Group. With Charles Campbell, Felton also acquired the grazing properties of Langi Kal Kal, near Beaufort in Victoria (now well known as the prison) and Murray Downs, near Swan Hill in New South Wales, now a sybaritic golf resort.

Felton lodged in Gertrude Street, Collingwood in 1859, then from 1863 at Mrs O'Reilly's Rooming House on the Esplanade and then in Dalgety Street. Between 1861-91, he had eight addresses, all but two in St Kilda. He bought Wattle House (23) in 1884, but after alterations, only lived there briefly until 1888.

Most eccentrically for such a wealthy man, at the Esplanade Felton lived in a downstairs front sitting room of only 7.5 x 4.5 m, and an upstairs bedroom. The sitting room was packed with pictures hung from every inch of wall and later arrivals stacked against walls, with some orderly bookshelves and others crammed and overflowing, accumulated teetering piles of catalogues, heaps of papers, unopened copies of *The Spectator* and *The Times* and an indiscriminate collection of decorative arts some still with auction stickers, including clocks, pedestals with marble busts, ornaments and miscellaneous rubbish. He was also a keen collector of recorded music and owned one of the first cylinder gramophones that his visitors had ever seen. A hotel waiter always served him whiting for breakfast and chicken for dinner, but no lunch, though he sometimes dined at the Australian Club in William Street (26). From his sitting room, he must have enjoyed a grandstand view of the arrival of the Duke of York at St Kilda Pier (1) in 1901.

Felton paid less than £600 annually to the hotel for his accommodation, taken from his personal expense budget of £1,200-1,800 per year, a substantial amount for a single man. His body was manipulated by a German masseur twice a week, whom he financed to open a gymnasium in the city and to whom he left a legacy in his will. Felton never married. Sir John Longstaff's posthumous and uncharacteristically passive portrait of him sitting in Grimwade's garden is held and usually exhibited by the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV). Felton sought no public office and his many benefactions were usually discreet and anonymous.

Alfred Felton was a friend of Brice Frederick Bunny, born in Berkshire, a lawyer at the English Bar, who came to Melbourne in 1852, was admitted to the Victorian Bar, became chairman of the St Kilda municipality, was elected to the Victorian Legislative Assembly and in 1874 became Victoria's Commissioner of Titles, but also a classicist and lover of music. He was the father of seven children, including the eminent Melbourne artist, Rupert Bunny (1864-1947), who was born at the family home Eckerberg, in Inkerman Street, which was named after his mother's home in Germany, and was the venue for musical soirees. Rupert Bunny took lessons from the painter William Ford (c1820? 1823?-84) who also lived and had a studio in Inkerman Street. Rupert Bunny later attended Alma Road Grammar School (27).

When in 1874, Mrs Marie Bunny took the seven children to England for two years, Brice Bunny lived with Alfred Felton and Professor Herbert Strong of the University of Melbourne. Felton purchased Rupert Bunny's atmospheric painting, *Sea Idyll* (c1890), from the artist who had sent it to Felton from Paris where he was living and painting and gave to the National Gallery of Victoria in 1892. It was the first work of Bunny's to enter an Australian public collection, although his works had already been purchased by Sarah Bernhardt and been exhibited at the Old Salon in Paris.

On his death, Felton gave his art collection and £383,000 of his £500,000 estate to the NGV. This made the Melbourne Gallery's acquisition budget greater than London's National and Tate Galleries combined. Even within fifty years, it had transformed the NGV from a little-known provincial collection into a financially well-endowed institution with an international reputation for

great masterpieces. By 1960, Felton's bequest had endowed the NGV with the finest classic collection in Australia, often bought when world art prices were low. The Felton Bequest had by 2005 purchased some 15,000 artworks worth over \$1 billion. Invested wisely, Felton's donation still purchases works for the gallery, over a century later. The NGV's Felton Society is operated by the NGV Foundation. The GNGV has commemorated Felton by commissioning a giant marble bust of him for their collection. At the Espy, the tradition of Felton's passion for the arts continues today, with its music concerts, comedy, photographic exhibitions, theatre and for some years, the Melbourne Writers' Festival.

By 1914, both the owner James Orkney and his widow Margaret had died and the Esplanade was sold to Edward and Martin Hoban, who leased it to Peter McQuade. More significantly, from 1920-30 the lessee became Thomas Symington Carlyon, of Carlyon's Hotel, corner of Bourke and Spencer Streets. Carlyon had the architects Gibbs and Finlay make renovations and additions, including a ballroom. Sarah Bernhardt, the great actress is said to have stayed at the Esplanade with her entourage of 12 assorted animals.

Carlyon's Hotel Esplanade became a premier jazz and dance venue. It was enormously popular, with music night after night. In 1924 his Eastern Tent Ballroom had popular nights when evening dress was optional and party nights that were strictly formal. Musicians were imported and locals, particularly jazz musicians were encouraged and supported. Carlyon's hand-painted sign is still visible on the facade.

T S Carlyon died in 1925 and in 1927 Thomas Symington Carlyon, Junior (d 1982), established the famous Green Mill Dancehall on the site of Wirth's Circus, whose entrance was a Dutch windmill with sails, which was converted to the Trocadero dancehall, and is now the Victorian Arts Centre. With his brother Norman he also had interests in the Ambassador Hotel, the Hotel Australia and a hotel in Spencer Street. In 1930 the Esplanade licensee's house was demolished to build the Spanish Mission style Baymor Flats (10), demolished in 2004.

By 1932, Norman Dean Carlyon's (1903-86)¹ company The Australia Hotel Pty Ltd owned the Hotel Australia, Collins Street and later, both Carlyon and Frederick Matear (1888-1968) owned its freehold. In 1938, the new company had the Australia Hotel site substantially demolished. The Carlyon and Matear's new modernist hotel opened in 1939, only a year after the opening of the comparable, immediately successful, but smaller Prince of Wales Hotel, designed by architect Robert H McIntyre in Fitzroy Street (16), and the owners of the Espy and the Prince were in direct competition, for fashionable modern clientele.

At the side of the Hotel Esplanade was a rockery in the style of the Catani Gardens (3), the setting for the big bands that played in the '30s and '40s. Entertainment in the '50s and '60s was mainly on Saturday nights with television performers such as the singers Harold Blair, Ron Lees and Barry Crocker.

In 1937, alterations by the hotel architects Sydney Smith, Ogg & Serpell (36) in the north-west corner created a new public bar and the verandah was demolished to build a new entry. The Esplanade of the '40s and '50s like the George Hotel in Fitzroy Street was a resort for families from the country and half the rooms were let to permanents, many were wealthy. Their rooms were carefully decorated and comfortable and there was a good restaurant. But in 1952, the owner, Edward Hoban died and by 1954 when the Cooke family bought the Espy, few permanent residents remained and the owner's villa Orcadia was demolished to build the Bottle Shop. Within the year, the Esplanade was sold again to Leon Wolawski who owned it for twelve years.

St Kilda's reputation as a holiday and resort destination was plummeting in freefall. During the 1960s, the Espy's 'Snakepit' basement bar was a rendezvous for prostitutes on their work-breaks

¹ Norman later wrote the book: N D Carlyon, *I Remember Blamey*, Melbourne 1980.

and in 1973, the hotel was proposed for Melbourne's first casino. Another proposal from the next owners Sands Pty Ltd was for a 20-storey, 600-bed hotel, with no poker machines.

But the musical tradition continued. By 1979, The Esplanade was one of the few venues in Melbourne that was nurturing Australian music and where jazz continued to be played, as it had been since the 1920s. In 1983, St Kilda Council remembered Alfred Felton by fixing a memorial plaque to the building. In 1987 new owners Evinden Pty Ltd again proposed refurbishing the old hotel, with 85 serviced apartments overhead in an 18-storey building.

Jazz evolved to disco in the seventies, then to blues and country in the eighties and over the past 25 years, 'the Espy' has been crucial in promoting cutting-edge Australian popular music. From 1994-98 there were over 300 live recording sessions there, with about 25 different acts performing live each week, with simultaneous performances in three venues for both paying and non-paying audiences, as well as its continued support for the other arts. No other hotel in Melbourne fulfilled all these roles and for so long.



The Espy, 2004.

Performers closely associated with the Espy in this period have included: Dave Graney, Kate Cebrano, Steve Cummings, Deborah Conway, Paul Kelly Archie Roach and Rubie Hunter, Men at Work, Painters and Dockers, Bachelors from Prague and Renee Geyer. In comedy, the Espy has been essential in establishing the careers of Greg Fleet, Anthony Morgan, Trevor Marmalade and Martin & Molloy.

By 1988-89 the community was concerned that again development proposals threatened 'the Espy,' Save St Kilda and Turn the Tide began activism and in 1990 the National Trust responded by classifying the hotel. In 1992 Save St Kilda wrote a Community Charter fearing that another ownership transfer from Evinden Pty Ltd to Santope Pty Ltd may end the live music. The transfer was averted.

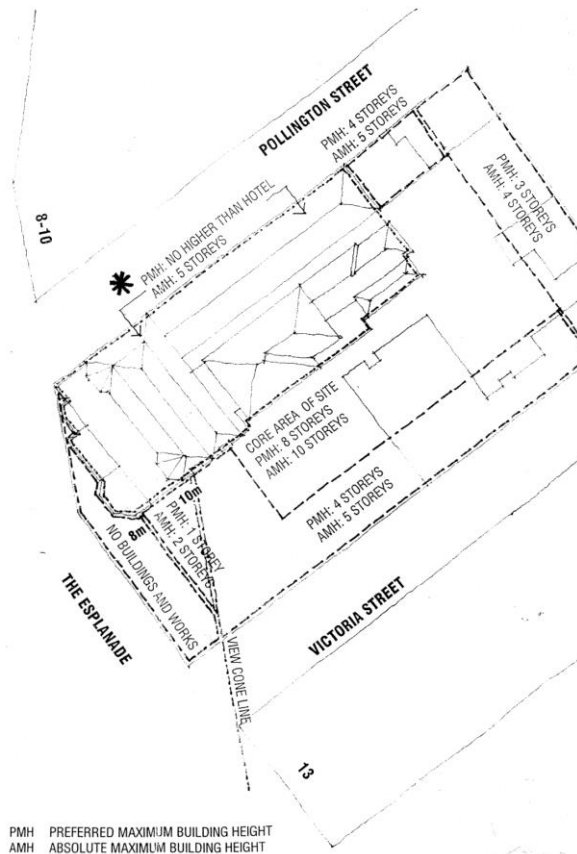
In 1990, it was classified by the National Trust of Australia (Victoria). Inexplicably, in May 1998 Heritage Victoria refused to register the Esplanade as not of state significance, which only casts doubt on their assessment criteria.

In 1994 for the first time in its 112 years fire risk caused eviction of the remaining permanent guests and 65 poker machines were again proposed. From 1995-97, Carlton and United Breweries briefly owned the hotel. Ross Hannaford, ace lead guitarist with Daddy Cool cited his Monday night residency at the Espy in the 1990s as '...probably the low-point in his career.'

In 1997 the Becton Corporation's Becton Esplanade Pty Ltd bought the Espy as one of Melbourne's 'premier development opportunities.' A design competition was announced with submissions from Denton Corker Marshall, Billard Leece, Ashton Raggett McDougall, Nation Fender Katsalidis and the highly innovative London architects Alsop & Störmer. Some proposals included demolishing the hotel.

An eminent panel of the developer's nominees selected the design by Nation Fender Katsalidis (11) of 38-stories, which would demolish Baymor Court and part of the hotel. Local resident Alex Njoo wrote a warning letter to *The Age*: 'Once more unto the breach...' The Esplanade Alliance, a powerful and well-organised group represented residents, traders, ex-councillors, musicians, architects, artists, lawyers and other community representatives joined with the National Trust to virulently oppose the development. A thousand people attended a rally in December 1998 and 11,500 objections were collected to a tower that would be 'as high as Crown Casino.'

Detail of Port Phillip Planning Scheme, Amendment C25.



Earlier *The Age* headlined: '...[a] Godzilla that will dwarf one of the city's favourite watering holes and music venues.' Both local Liberal MPs and the Liberal Premier of Victoria, Jeff Kennett opposed the development.

For over thirty years, The Espy community has resisted proposals for high-rise apartments or casinos which local people and professionals are adamant would over-develop the site and the Esplanade Alliance was satisfied they had opposed Becton for five years, and won and in August 2001, the Esplanade Hotel was sold on a 200-year lease to Savin and Disordet Pty Ltd, nominee companies of Vince Sofo and Paul Adamo of the Chevron nightclub and previously other cafes, restaurants and clubs since 1981. Curiously, neither man drinks alcohol. By this time the Espy was very run down. There were 40 hotel and boarding rooms above the pub, a recording studio, a backyard and a comedy room. Several 'colourful characters' were operating their own 'businesses' from the public bar from the public phones.

Sofo and Adamo began renovating: firstly the Gershwin Room (the hotel's former Dining Room), venue for the large shows, then the back-of house facilities, including the kitchen were relocated and rebuilt, as was the public bar. The new first floor dining room, with its 180 degree bay views is within the former 4.5 metre ceiling height of the public bar.

On 14 November 2002, the *Herald Sun* illustrated a new Becton design (still by Fender Katsalidis Architects), for a strongly horizontal, serpentine development: 60 apartments of ten stories over a three-storied podium at front, with a large hospitality tenancy and impressive townhouses facing Victoria and Pollington Streets. This proposal was also opposed by The Esplanade Alliance, refused by the City of Port Phillip and won on appeal to VCAT.

In 2006, the pub was bought by former nightclub operators, Adamo and Vince Sofo.

In May 2007 the most forgiving City of Port Phillip awarded the swish and expensive The Esplanade Apartments, a 'top design award' for the best apartment building over five units in the municipality. Esplanade Apartments was finally completed in May 2008, with interiors designed by Hecker Phelan and Guthrie, who had designed interiors at Tribeca, The Botanical and Comme Bar. The building's developer, Becton founder, Max Beck, occupies the building's most expensive apartment, believed to be worth over \$7 million.

When John Farnham announced his The Last Time Tour, he joked that he always dreamt of playing at The Espy but never had. Farnham's manager, Glenn Wheatley jokingly sent the hotel a demo tape, which was gratefully accepted by The Espy's booking manager and so Whispering Jack finally played The Espy on 29 September 2002. The next year, Molly Meldrum and Glen Wheatley supported a push for a 3am license. The Espy remains a venue for live music performance as it has most nights for eighty years and for general entertainment and hospitality, since 1857. The applause continues.

On 25 October 2008, The Espy held a dinner to begin a month of celebrations of its 130th birthday: Sofo and Adamo will host 300 bands in 30 days. Its resident cartoon artist Fred Negro, described his meetings with the pub's ghost in the 70s, when he played in a band and worked as the pub's cleaner. The shimmering curtains in the Gershwin Room were the ghost's favourite plaything, it seems. In May 2009, Sofo and Adamo took their gently paced walk further up-market by opening the very smart Ichi Ni (One, Two in Japanese), an *izakaya*, or Japanese pub only the second in Melbourne after Maedaya in Richmond. Its on the site of the former bottleshop, which itself had replaced the hotel owner's villa Orcadia.

By late 2011, however, the manager of the hotel's Gershwin Room was noticing that the music scene had moved across river and that the Espy and St Kilda seemed to be losing it. 'I hate the word but there's just no vibe' he lamented. 'There's no sense of community, no general area for entertainment. You go to Fitzroy, and you've got Laundry and Old Bar, and around the corner are Bar Open and the Evelyn. That's four gigs in one block.' Once, St Kilda was like that...

Other St Kilda venues hosting live music include the Prince, the Vineyard, the Snakepit, Dog's Bar, Greyhound Public Bar, Pint on Punt, Veludo, St Kilda Bowling Club and Pure Pop Records, Barkly Street.

By 2012, Julian Gerner's Melbourne Pub Group Pty Ltd, incorporated in Melbourne in 2006, which owns and operates the Albert Park Hotel, the Middle Park Hotel, the Newmarket Hotel, and other pubs, were reported as having bought the Espy, as well as the Prince (16), but this sale does not appear to have gone through, because in 2014, Adamo and Vince Sofo were reported as still attempting to sell it and failing to receive a suitable offer.

In August 2012, veteran wedding singer Bobby Valentine MC'd seven hours of live music in the Public Bar to mark its relaunch as a live music venue. He had become a lightning rod for the issue of live music in St Kilda since his popular Sunday afternoon gig at the Great Provider beside the marina was shut by a noise complaint in December 2011. St Kilda's music scene was shut down by a resident on the other side of Marine Parade in December 2011. 'How can it be that a Harley Davidson tearing along that road isn't noise, but music is?' asked Valentine. He said the scene had become the victim of the success of local protesters who cut their teeth on the campaign against the proposed Triangle Development (3).

Perhaps inadvertently, their attempts to save the old St Kilda have contrived to the demise of one aspect of it – live music.’ The Melbourne Pub Group had spent about \$250,000 refitting and soundproofing the room. The Public Bar returned to live music every night, but the upstairs much large Bandroom remained closed, its future uncertain. Gerner, who started the dance night Onelove there in the 2000s, claimed it hadn’t been successful as a live music venue for almost a decade. Perhaps the APG, who bought the Prince in December 2012, have another agenda. It was regularly hired as a venue for the SBS TV show *RockWiz*.

In May 2015, the Espy, with its 3 am alcohol licence and 1,752 patron capacity, was suddenly closed and has remained shuttered up for the next two years, for the first time since its rebuilding in 1878. It is said some internal construction work then took place, but it also fell into disrepair.

In March 2017, it was finally sold, to hotel-owner the Sand Hill Road Group. Founded in 2000 by Andy Mullins, Doug, Tom and Matt, the group owns six stylishly architectural inner-urban pubs, including the Garden State Hotel, Flinders Lane; the Richmond Club Hotel, the Prahran Hotel, the Bridge Hotel, Richmond; The Terminus Hotel, Abbotsford; The Posty (the former Richmond Post Office); the Waterside Hotel, 508 Flinders Street, cnr King Street, and previously owned by a syndicate for AFL footballers including Nick Riewoldt and Nathan Brown; and Holliava, Swan Street, Richmond. They once owned, but have now sold the Commercial Club Hotel, Fitzroy; the Loft, Lonsdale Street; and the Heritage Hotel, Rockhampton.

In April, Sand Hill Road announced their plans for the hotel. For the first time, it will utilise all five floors, including the roof, for bars and entertainment. The fourth floor has been inaccessible to the public since the last guests left 23 years ago, and presumably not been previously used for other than bedrooms, or storage. It will become a cocktail bar named ‘The Ghost of Alfred Felton.’ The website for the Waterside gives some indication of how completely the potential of the Espy could be realised with a substantial cash injection, more indeed like the Prince (16).

The roof has never previously been accessible and would have extraordinary views. Sand Hill Road will be essentially converting a two-storied building into five levels. They propose three live music stages, including the famed Gershwin Room, a 300-capacity beer garden, a main bar with a ‘whisky lab’ and the Kitchen Restaurant with seating for 120 at Street Level and a cool ‘stripped-back Dining Room on the First Floor. The press release confusingly claimed the ‘lower levels’ would be mostly jazz and blues stages, and a bottle shop. It will certainly be Sand Hill Road’s biggest project yet, and they are concerned to ‘reflect its history.’ It will re-open in October 2018.



The Espy has been closed for two years since May 2015. Photographs: Chris Eastman, April 2017



Sand Hill Road Group's Doug Maskiell, Tom Birch, Matt Mullins and Andy Mullins.

Notes

Historian Gillian Upton kindly informed me that she has seen the publican's licence dated 1857 for the New Bath Hotel. Cooper is incorrect in having it as 'New Baths Hotel' and later writers have frequently perpetuated his error. 'Bath' as a link with the English spa resort town, is Professor Miles Lewis's point (14).

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