

# Cornerstone or rhinestone: the fate of strategic planning in the post-political age

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**Abstract:** This paper draws on thinking about the post-political condition to critique recent strategic planning practices in NSW. Thinkers such as Mouffe, Rancière and Swynedouw suggest that we are now in an era founded on the suppression of the inherent conflictual or political nature of social action. This is called the 'post-political condition'. A key mechanism supporting this is the management of issues through technical and managerial processes controlled by 'experts' and designed to erase conflict and antagonism (the political). I agree with these thinkers that this is dangerous, has damaged democracy, but in particular has undermined planning. Based on a discourse analysis of the recent Draft Metropolitan Strategy for Sydney, this paper argues that strategic planning has been a key mechanism supporting the post-political condition in land use planning. The Draft Strategy constructs a consensus and argues that there are 'no winners or losers' from its policies. This narrows the range of possibilities, suppresses the political, and positions opponents of the Draft Strategy as 'enemies', rather than adversaries.

## Introduction

The potentially disruptive nature of 'politics' in urban planning has re-emerged as a theme in academic (Deas, 2013, p.9, McClymont, 2011, Ploger, 2004) as well as government discourse (NSW Government, 2013b). For example, the recent 'White Paper' on the new planning system in New South Wales (NSW) has argued that planning decisions should be 'depoliticised' (NSW Government, 2013b, p.106). The proposed new planning system in NSW advocates up-front strategic planning as a way of addressing 'negative local views of change and opposition to new development' (NSW Government, 2013b, p. 61). In Europe, the move to shape planning systems so that politics and conflict is removed has been seen as part of a broader movement termed the post-political (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012, Deas, 2013). Opponents of the move to the post-political argue that the apparent eradication of 'the political' in its antagonistic form damages democracy and will only result in the expression of the conflict or antagonism in other forms or forums (Mouffe, 2005). This paper draws on the concept of the post-political to examine the role of strategic planning in 'depoliticising' the planning system and the implications this might have for urban planning as a democratic institution.

## Background and methodology

This paper is based on a discourse analysis of a recent NSW planning strategy, the Draft Metropolitan Strategy for Sydney to 2031 ('Draft Strategy'). This was undertaken by examining the particular structures through which 'a certain sense of reality and understanding of the nature of society' (Norval, 1996, p.2) are constituted and maintained. Strategic planning has been described as operating through 'stories' and 'frames' which direct action (Healey et al., 1999). The White Paper on the proposed new planning system says that strategic planning 'tells the story about a place' (NSW Government, 2013b, p.61) and the Draft Strategy describes itself as laying the 'foundation' (NSW Government, 2013a, pp. 6 & 8) for other planning in the city and acts as a 'guide' for planning at other scales (NSW Government, 2013a, p.80). In this paper, these structures have therefore been described through 'narratives' or 'stories' that 'tell' us about whom the Draft Strategy 'speaks for' and who will benefit from its actions.

The post-political has emerged as a key conceptual framework for understanding the form of recent spatial policy (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012, Metzger, 2011). Following the identification of narratives in the Draft Strategy, the emphasise on 'depoliticising' the planning system lead to a comparison of the narratives with a specific conception of the post-political to understand the extent to which the Draft Strategy aligned with this concept.

The Draft Strategy was released in March 2013 by the NSW Government. Since 2005 there have been two other metropolitan strategies for Sydney: the City of Cities strategy (NSW Government, 2005) and the Metropolitan Plan (NSW Government, 2010). While there are important differences between each of these plans, the Draft Strategy, like the earlier plans, presents a vision for the city, a 'structure plan' for the metropolitan area and outlines key government objectives and actions under specific themes. In the Draft Strategy these themes are presented through five outcomes: balanced growth, a liveable city, productivity and prosperity, a healthy and resilient environment, and accessibility and connectivity (NSW Government, 2013a).

The current NSW Government was elected in March 2011 on the platform of reforming the land use planning system (NSW Government, 2013b) and while they had previously released a state-level strategic plan and plans designed to address specific issues, such as the conflict between mining/coal seam gas extraction and agriculture (the Strategic Regional Land Use Plans), the Draft Metropolitan Strategy was the first 'comprehensive' land use strategy issued by the new government. The government's proposal for the reformed planning system was released in April 2013 and includes measures specifically designed to re-configure the interaction between 'politics' and planning decisions. These measures include increased community participation, greater emphasis on up-front strategic planning and the use of 'expert panels' to advise on design quality (NSW Government, 2013b). The Draft Metropolitan Strategy is described as typical of the highest level strategic plan (the Regional Growth Plan) under the proposed system (NSW Government, 2013b).

This next section will describe the theoretical background of the analysis. This will be followed by a description of the two key narratives (which have been called 'the heart of this strategy' and 'we can maximise the benefit'), and an analysis of the narratives' relation to a specific conceptualisation of the post-political.

## **Theoretical background**

The notion of the post-political has emerged as a critique of the models of politics that have developed in liberal democracies since the end of the Cold War (Swyngedouw, 2007). While different conceptions of the post-political order have been developed by thinkers such as Chantal Mouffe, Žilvož Žižek, Jacques Rancière, and Erik Swyngedouw, each recognises that there has been a shift in recent politics to approaches that attempt to minimise dissent, emphasise consensus, deliver 'rational solutions' (often through the use of technical experts) and limit potentially disruptive policy alternatives (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012). The post-political approach has been used to critique and problematize the following: environmental discourse (Swyngedouw, 2007), planning discourse (Gunder and Hillier, 2009), recent changes in the UK planning system (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012, Inch, 2012), and specific environmental disputes (Oosterlynck and Swyngedouw, 2010).

This paper will use the approach to the post-political discussed in the work of Chantal Mouffe (2000; 2005; 2013). A distinction between 'politics' and 'the political' underpins Mouffe's conceptualisation of the post-political: 'politics' is defined as the ensemble of practices and discourse that seeks to establish order in society, while 'the political' is the ineradicable antagonism that forms society (Mouffe, 2005). The post-political seeks to negate antagonism and address political problems through consensus or technical solutions. Mouffe argues that political problems always involve a choice between conflicting alternatives and therefore cannot be solved through technical means that 'wish away' antagonism (Mouffe, 2013).

Mouffe's political theory, initially developed with Ernesto Laclau in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), is anti-essentialist, which means it is based on the notion that there is no essential, pre-existing presence that determines the form of a society or the position of subjects within that society (Mouffe, 2013). All actions and objects only have meaning within a system of constantly re-negotiated significant differences (Howarth, 2000).

Social identities are formed through these constantly re-negotiated relations. Social identities become fixed, although in an incomplete and contingent manner, through difference. Laclau and Mouffe apply a strict anti-essentialist approach and therefore the element that fixes identity must be outside the system, as an 'exclusion', because otherwise it would be simply another difference. Mouffe call this structuring of social identity, the 'we'/'they' relations (Mouffe, 2000). This has two implications. Firstly, fixed identity is based on negativity, a lack, an exclusion; it is never complete. Secondly, the 'fixing' is contingent and the result of power, in the sense that it has involved a 'decision'. Based on this theory, social antagonisms do not develop because of pre-determined identities that clash over established interests but because an identity cannot completely realise its identity (Howarth, 2000).

Mouffe argues that antagonism cannot be eradicated but it can be 'tamed' (Mouffe, 2005). This is because there are two possible types of 'we'/'they' relations: a 'friend/enemy relation' or a 'friend/adversary relation'. The friend/enemy relation is where the opponent is placed in the position of enemy 'to be destroyed'; the friend/adversary is where there is common agreement about the basis of the rules governing politics but disagreement about how these should be implemented. This does not remove ineradicable antagonism, 'the political', but instead channels it into institutions and 'tames' it.

Planning is part of what Mouffe calls politics because it is a set of institutions, practices and discourses designed to establish order in the use of land (Gleeson and Low, 2000, p.204). The post-political problematizes the 'order' established through planning processes, questioning the (often unarticulated but ineradicable) political decisions that underpin it.

## **Analysis**

This section summarise two key narratives in the Draft Strategy. These have been called, using the language of the Draft Strategy, 'the heart of this strategy' narrative and the 'we can maximise the benefit' narrative. These narratives have been selected because they discuss consensus and the distribution of benefits, both key themes in Mouffe's conceptualisation of the post-political.

### **'The heart of this strategy'**

The Draft Strategy constructs a narrative about consensus and the way strategic planning 'speaks on behalf of the people'. The Draft Strategy asserts that it expresses the 'needs and desires' (NSW Government, 2013a, p.3) of the people of Sydney, so that the 'people living and working in Sydney' are at the 'heart of this Strategy' (NSW Government, 2013a, p.3). This narrative is constructed in four ways. Firstly, the Draft Strategy links the government's voice with the voice of the 'people'. Secondly, the Draft Strategy argues that it reflects a consensus on the attributes of 'quality of life' in Sydney. Thirdly, the Draft Strategy claims it addresses essential and clearly evident needs and desires. Finally, the Draft Strategy outlines the process that has been used to capture and reflect a consensus about collective needs and desires.

The Draft Strategy directly links the government's voice with the voice of the 'people', so that at times the two blend into one. This is best illustrated in the way collective pronouns shift meaning throughout the document so that at one moment they represent government priorities and at another collective priorities, until 'we' and 'our' appear to indicate 'everyone'.

An example of this is the shift in the use of 'we' and 'our' in the vision for the city. The vision is initially presented in the Minister's foreword as the NSW Government's vision for Sydney, so that the 'our' represents the government: 'This draft Metropolitan Strategy for Sydney sets out the NSW Government's vision for our premier city' (NSW Government, 2013a, p.3).

The vision is then described on the following page where 'our' is used to describe a range of elements, some of which might be considered part of the government's direction ('strong housing market, diverse economy and efficient and well-functioning freight network') while others are more private needs and desires, such as 'homes, work and study' (NSW Government, 2013a, p.4). Both use 'our' to describe the possessive relation. This is combined in the final line of the vision where 'we' and 'our' appear to encompass 'everyone': 'we will achieve our vision for Sydney as a strong global city and liveable local city in 2031' (NSW Government, 2013a, p.4). This blurring of 'we' continues throughout the document, sometimes referring to actions by the government, such as the need to capitalise on existing and planned infrastructure (NSW Government, 2013a, p.12) and sometimes referring to actions by people in Sydney, such as the pressure 'we' place on the natural environment (NSW Government, 2013a, p.64).

The second way this narrative is established is by positing a consensus view on the attributes that constitute Sydney's 'quality of life', such as the importance of music, art and sport (NSW Government, 2013a, p.34), recreational trails (NSW Government, 2013a, p.36) and Sydney's 'rural and bushland backdrop' (NSW Government, 2013a, p.11). These references to 'quality of life' are not restricted to the outcome 'A Liveable City' but are used throughout the Draft Strategy, for example, in the environment outcome: 'the positive impact of an attractive, healthy and resilient environment to Sydney's overall quality of life and success' (NSW Government, 2013a, p.58).

While this 'quality of life' can be improved (NSW Government, 2013a, p.7), it already exists in Sydney, is shared by its people and is transparently reflected in the Draft Strategy. It is made up of social features (diversity of housing, jobs, accessible transport, and rural lifestyle close to the urban area, recreational and cultural activities) as well as to natural features, unavailable elsewhere, which contribute to its specialness and uniqueness, for example: 'Sydney Harbour is the defining feature of Sydney and one of our biggest economic advantages' (NSW Government, 2013a, p.21).

The third way the narrative is developed is the way the Draft Strategy incorporates people's needs and desires. These are developed *a priori* based on the assumed changes, such as the 'needs of our growing population' and specific housing needs reflected in 'demand'. For example, the need for smaller houses (NSW Government, 2013a, p.32), the 'needs of local people' for spaces for social connections, support and assistance (NSW Government, 2013a, p.36) and the 'diverse' open space needs (NSW Government, 2013a, p.36).

This narrative is also supported by a description of the 'consultation and collaboration' processes and procedures that have been used to develop the shared vision (NSW Government, 2013a, p.6). The consultation techniques used were: advertised 'drop-in sessions' where people could ask questions and 'post comments'; stakeholder workshops; and various online tools to generate discussion and elicit comments (Elton Consulting, 2012). The description emphasises that this is a strategy development process that uses technical 'tools' that can 'capture' views and deliver a consensus. There is no critique of the adequacy of these tools or approaches. This provides the impression that the Strategy is the result of the free exercise of public reason (Mouffe, 2000) and that the ideas of 'the people' have been directly transferred from the 'voice of the people' to the Strategy contents: 'What you told us in the consultation underpins much of the Strategy' (NSW Government, 2013a, p.3).

The Draft Strategy claims that it describes the 'heart' of the people, that it has captured the consensus view of the future of Sydney. While there may be some 'lack', the vision described in the Draft Strategy itself is 'complete' and 'whole' and fully reflects the needs and desires of the people. The next section describes the way the Draft Strategy addresses the distribution of benefits and costs.

#### **'We can maximise the benefits'**

The second narrative describes the way costs and benefits are distributed as a result of the Draft Strategy. The Draft Strategy adopts a specific approach to the way it describes costs and benefits. This minimises the impression that there are winners or losers from the Strategy's policies. Benefits tend to be generalised, city-wide benefits, rather than benefits that accrue to particular groups. When there are benefits to specific areas, these are generalised, so that they become city-wide benefits or even benefits to the NSW and national economy, for example, the discussion of transport infrastructure (NSW Government, 2013a, p.17).

The only concept that Draft Strategy explicitly associates with clear differential benefits is agglomeration. The Draft Strategy defines agglomeration as: 'the benefits which flow to firms from locating in areas which have a higher density of economic activity' (NSW Government, 2013a, p.113). The benefits of agglomeration are differential benefits because they flow to a specific section of society, 'firms', but these benefits are subsumed in a generalised benefit, the efficient operation of the city, which is distributed to everyone.

Benefits are therefore uniformly distributed across the city and the Draft Strategy envisages a 'neutral terrain' (Mouffe, 2000, p.110) where there are no spatial differences in benefits that result from its policies. The discussion of the cost-benefit analysis undertaken as evidence for the Draft Strategy is indicative. The discussion describes the cost-benefit analysis and presents different costs and benefits associated with options but these options are divorced from specific policies in the Draft Strategy, so it is difficult to determine to whom the costs or benefits described have been distributed.

The narrative of maximising benefits is reflected in the Draft Strategy's discussion of how growth and change occurs. Growth and change occur through the generation of opportunities rather than through their redistribution. Based on the Draft Strategy's narrative of growth, Sydney will grow 'from within' or, when it needs stimulus, will attract people and investment from outside but without the re-distribution of resources. The job target for Western Sydney provides a good example of the way this narrative operates. The Draft Strategy establishes a target of 50% of new jobs in Western Sydney. This is not framed as the redistribution of the jobs from one part of Sydney to another but as a change in the type of jobs within Western Sydney, a diversification of Western Sydney jobs. Jobs in Western Sydney are expected to grow without there being any losses elsewhere in the city.

The metaphor of 'generation' or 'regeneration' as a form of growth is a powerful one in the Draft Strategy. It is most commonly used to describe the way places will be changed by new development. This 'regeneration' or 'renewal' will only bring benefits, not losses. Growth is framed as 'urban renewal', which 'transforms', 'unlocks', 'renews' and 'revitalises', but does not 'redistribute'. The 'revitalisation' of established areas will add to the supply of housing, employment, infrastructure, services and social activities rather than deplete them or put them under pressure.

The connection of growth with these positive 'life-giving' terms presents growth as a natural phenomenon. The 'naturalness' of growth is demonstrated in the way the population projections, which lead to housing and job projections, are presented in the Strategy. These projections are a 'black box', there is no consideration of alternative population scenarios, but also they are the inevitable result of 'natural' processes that cannot be avoided (NSW Government, 2013a, p.6). The population figures naturalise growth and make it appear inevitable.

While the naturalisation of growth has positive benefits, connecting it to 'life', the Draft Strategy also suggests that there is an uncontrollable aspect to natural processes. 'Natural hazard events' (NSW Government, 2013a, p.61) can result from natural process. In the same way as we need to respond to these natural events, growth, as a similar natural process, is something we need to 'tackle' (NSW Government, 2013a, p.3). The logic of maximising benefits means the threatening elements of growth needs to be tackled in a non-distributive manner. The Draft Strategy does this by introducing the concept of 'balance'.

'Balance' has multiple meanings in the Draft Strategy. It is both an outcome and a process: the Draft Strategy delivers 'balance', for example, 'balanced growth', but also operates through 'balanced' decisions. 'Balance' means addressing different demands so that there are no losers:

A balanced and consistent approach to land use decisions, including decisions on delivery times, will help avoid potential impacts.

(NSW Government, 2013a, p.74)

This specifically means reflecting 'community and business feedback and environmental and market considerations' (NSW Government, 2013a, p.7) and applies to the location of urban development, jobs and housing, mining and agriculture, Sydney and regional NSW, and environment and development.

The notion of 'balance' can be applied at the broadest scale (the city) and at smaller scales, such as 'local' centres. For example, balance is used to address the needs of the freight industry compared to the needs of local people. The discussion of freight in the Draft Strategy is one of the few places that there is recognition of any negative impacts of a decision. The desire for quiet streets might be undermined by the growth of freight traffic in local communities. The solution to this problem is not a specific policy direction but 'balance':

As the number of people living and working in centres grows, we must balance the desire for quiet streets with the needs of the freight industry.

(NSW Government, 2013a, p.74)

This section has presented the ways the Draft Strategy's narrative about the distribution of benefits and costs in which there are no winners or losers. The next section will analyse these narratives from the perspective of the post-political, as conceived by Mouffe (2000; 2005; 2013), and discuss the implications for urban planning of adopting these approaches.

## **Discussion**

The two narratives presented, 'the heart of this strategy' and 'we can maximise the benefits', are characteristic of the post-political order, as defined by Mouffe (2000; 2005; 2013). The 'the heart of this strategy' narrative represents the desire for consensus, which Mouffe calls the 'sacralization of consensus' in post-political thinking (Mouffe, 2000, p.113). Mouffe describes contemporary politics are operating:

supposedly on a neutral terrain and solutions are available that could satisfy everybody

(Mouffe, 2000, p.110).

The 'we can maximise the benefits' narrative is indicative of this 'no winners or losers' approach in the post-political. This section will now discuss the implications for urban planning of developing a strategic plan based on a post-political foundation.

The Draft Strategy argues that it represents a view of the 'good Sydney' and that this view is shared by 'Sydneyiders'. This shared view is based on a rational process of community engagement but also on an assumed consensus about certain attributes of the city, expressed as the 'needs and desires its people'. It is important to recognise that the construction of collective identities is not the post-political aspect of the Draft Strategy. The creation of collective identities based on the 'passions' is an integral component of democratic politics as conceived by Mouffe (2013). In fact, the failure of liberal discourse on democracy is its failure to recognise that politics is about collective identities and involves more than an appeal to the operation of reason (Mouffe, 2000). The issue with the post-political order and with the Draft Strategy is the form of the collective identity and the scope it provides for democratic contestation:

The we/they distinction is constitutive of social life, and democratic politics needs to provide the discourse, the practices and the institutions that allow this distinction to be constructed politically.

(Mouffe, 2013).

The Draft Strategy creates an 'us', which can be described as 'Sydneyiders', which is inclusive, 'total', 'complete' and consensual. Based on the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) collective identities are constituted through an 'outside' or 'other'. This 'other' is excluded from the constitution of the collective identity: for there to be an 'us' ('Sydneyiders'), there also must be a 'them'. The definition of the Draft Strategy's 'them' therefore becomes important in understanding its contribution to democratic politics.

The Draft Strategy does not explicitly define a 'them', as this would not accord with its consensual, inclusive approach. A possible 'them' is those 'outside' the boundaries of the city, for example competing Australian and world cities. This approach has been used in the past strategies and elements remain in the Draft Strategy. For example, the imperative to 'sustain' Sydney's 'global status' (NSW Government, 2013a ,p.9) and 'global advantage' (NSW Government, 2013a, p 28)

Another possibility is the current political opposition:

The previous Labor government said Sydney was full. It didn't deliver key infrastructure, and congestion was the result. It didn't deliver an adequate supply of housing, and the result was upward pressure on home prices.

(NSW Government, 2013a, p.3)

Both of these are not sufficient to constitute the collective identity proposed in the Draft Strategy. In the first case, the Draft Strategy frames the enhancement of Sydney's global city status as a contributor to overall growth rather than simply the maintenance of status. In the second case, the partisan division is also not sufficient, as the Draft Strategy will need to deliver in throughout Sydney, as well as in partisan (Labor) areas.

The totalising vision of the city's future suggests that the 'outside' is those who oppose the 'quality of life' and the policies required to maintain this quality of life, as proposed in the Draft Strategy. This type of us/them distinction is termed by Mouffe (2000) a friend/enemy distinction, where the 'enemy' is one who can be 'destroyed' and whose demands are illegitimate. While the characterisation of 'enemy' might appear extreme in the case of the Draft Strategy, it is evident that the proposed consensus 'requires' (NSW Government, 2013a, pp. 10, 17 & 74) some coercion to maintain it, such as measures to 'unblock processes' (NSW Government, 2013a, p.12), 'remove barriers' (NSW Government, 2013a, p.30), and address 'challenges' that are obstacles to maintaining the shared quality of life.

The consensus approach proposed in the Draft Strategy therefore positions those in opposition to the Strategy as an 'enemy', in Mouffe's terminology. The Draft Strategy defines not only a geographic boundary for Sydney but also a political boundary. It establishes who can legitimately engage in debate about the future of the city and who may not. The aim of this is to create 'blindness' and 'deafness' (Ranci re, 2006) to the political identities that might form from social demands (Laclau, 2005) that do not fall within its defined political boundary. The Draft Strategy can recognise and celebrate diversity (NSW Government, 2013a ,p.95) but only when it operates within the political

boundary it establishes. One of the aims of the Strategy is to stop heterogeneous demands from developing into political identities that might challenge its legitimacy. For example, the demand that 'urban renewal' might *not* bring benefits can be treated as an individual demand, driven by self-interest – positioned as NIMBYism (Ruming et al., 2012) – and therefore inconsistent with the collective demand defined in the Strategy as legitimate.

The second characteristic of the post-political is the construction of options in which there are no winners or losers (Mouffe, 2005), as represented in the 'we can maximise the benefits' narrative. The approach proposed by Mouffe (2005) recognises that society is the result of practices that seek to create order in a contingent environment and this involves the exclusion of certain possibilities. There are always 'winners and losers' from a decision in a pluralist democracy:

If the trade-offs in advantages and disadvantages were identical for everyone, judgements involved in making collective decisions would be roughly equivalent to those involved in making individual decisions: but the trade-offs are not the same for everyone

(Dahl in Mouffe, 2005)

The Draft Strategy does not acknowledge the exclusions that its policies will entail because it does not acknowledge that there will be winners and losers.

The implications for planning as a democratic institution of both of these narratives are that the suppression and silencing of alternative conceptions of the 'good' city is given legitimacy. Firstly, this reduces the alternatives about the future of the city that are presented in the Strategy. This damages democracy because as Mouffe argues a well-functioning democracy will 'acknowledge the real nature of its frontiers and the forms of exclusion that they entail' and provide 'clearly differentiated alternatives' (Mouffe, 2005). Secondly, it means that opposition to the Draft Strategy is displaced (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012) because it cannot be expressed in the terms of the Draft Strategy itself. The displacement may be from one level of government to another or from one planning process to another, for example, from strategic planning to development assessment. There is evidence that this displacement of opposition between different scales and levels of government has been experienced in the planning system in the United Kingdom (Inch, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

This paper argues that the 2013 Draft Metropolitan Strategy for Sydney is a post-political document. It attempts to avoid fundamental conflicts of interest about the future of the city by silencing adversarial forces and stage managing the negotiation of interests. It is 'post-political' because it frames politics so that antagonism and conflict (or in Mouffe's terms, 'the political') is avoided. Based on a discourse analysis of the Draft Strategy this paper has presented two narratives that align with the post-political, as conceived by Mouffe (2000; 2005; 2013). The foundation of strategic planning on post-political base positions the opponents of the Draft Strategy so that their exclusion from the debate about the future of the city is justified. The presentation of 'win-win' solutions, without winners or losers, obscures who is excluded from the decisions that have been made about the future of the city. The implications of this are the possible displacement of antagonism to different levels of government and to planning at different scales. This undermines planning as a democratic institution.

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