CONSERVATION——
ADAPTATION

KEEPING ALIVE THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE
ADAPTIVE REUSE OF HERITAGE
WITH SYMBOLIC VALUE

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This book presents presents the papers written by 39 participants following the 5th Workshop on Conservation, organised by the Conservation Network of the European Association for Architectural Education in Hasselt/Liège in 2015. All papers have been peer-reviewed. The Workshop was attended by 73 participants from the following countries: Belgium, Czech Republic, Ireland, Italy, Montenegro, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Turkey, United Kingdom.

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THE REUSE OF HERITAGE WITH 'SYMBOLIC VALUE' AND UNIVERSITY RESEARCH

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Over time, the needs that prompted the construction of many architectural complexes have ceased to be as the assigned functions of the buildings disappeared. Assigning new functions to abandoned complexes or to buildings that have lost their original role is a common problem, but this is more and more critical in the case of buildings that had a highly specialised function. Furthermore, the old function was often accompanied by an equally strong symbolic and spiritual meaning, so the issue of giving new functions becomes more complex. This is the case with religious buildings.

A gradual shift away from the religious practices performed over centuries can be observed throughout the Christian West, in countries with both Catholic and Protestant traditions. As a result, the abandonment of old churches has become a pressing problem[1]. For example, in the last fifteen years about 500 German churches have been closed, and four-fifths of these were Catholic churches.

In some cases, the Church hierarchy has tried to manage the phenomenon, creating special offices dedicated to selling abandoned complexes, so as to control, in a sense, the future functions. This has happened, for example, in Scotland, the Netherlands and France, where some dioceses have even created special websites where all the buildings on sale are listed with pictures, a description of the asset and price.

The massive immigration that has occurred in Europe in recent years has shifted the balance between the different faiths; while on one hand the number of Protestant and Catholic Christian churchgoers has diminished, Christians of other denominations, such as Orthodox and Coptic, have increased although they lacked places of worship. So, when some abandoned buildings were assigned to the exercise of other cults, it was easy to allocate the existing churches to different Christian denominations. The same cannot be said of the transformation of churches into mosques, which had been almost totally absent in the whole Christian West but which became necessary by virtue of the strong immigration from Islamic countries. Only in some cases, such as that of the Church of San Paolino dei Giardinieri in Palermo, has the transition of a church from Christian worship into a mosque occurred without problems. On the other hand, during the 2015 Venice Biennale, the Church of Mercy (privately owned since 1973 and unused since 1969) was used as Iceland's pavilion and the artist Christoph Büchel oversaw its transformation into a mosque for a period of seven months[2] (Fig. 1). This caused innumerable controversies, including that stimulated by the Patriarch of Venice, who stated that 'for any other use but the Catholic Christian worship, permission should be requested from ecclesiastical authority'.

The 1983 Code of Canon Law (Canon 1222 §1) states that: 'If a church cannot in any way be used for divine worship and there is no possibility of its being restored, the diocesan bishop may allow it to be used for some secular but not unbecoming purpose'. In any case, a new sacred use is not forbidden, as in the case of the deconsecrated church of San
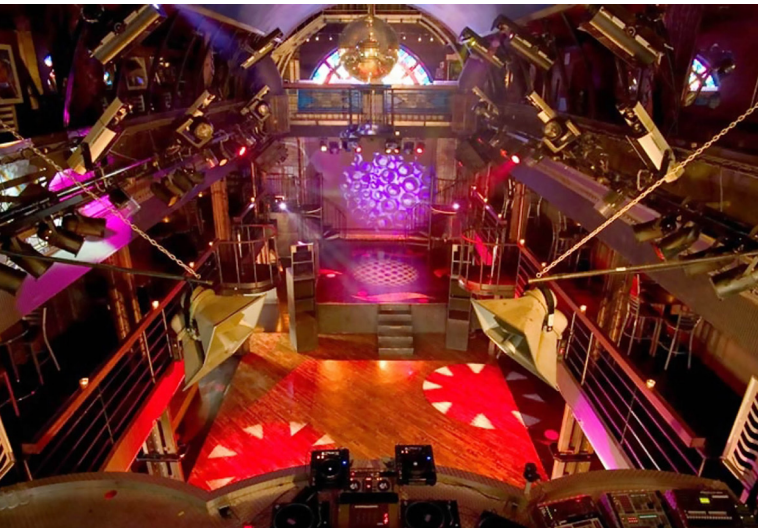
FIG. 1. The interior of the Church of Mercy in Venice, temporarily converted into a mosque during the Art Biennale in 2015.

FIG. 2. Mezzanine, volumes and colors in the transformation of St. George's church in Ruzante Theatre in Padua.

FIG. 3. The interior of the nightclub Limelight in New York has completely deleted the appearance of the original neo-Gothic church.

FIG. 4. The classic facade of the Observance Church in Montpellier with the back of a red Cadillac inserted in the portal lunette to mark the entrance of Rockstore Cafe.

Paolino dei Giardinieri. In 1990 it was sold to the region of Sicily by the Curia of Palermo in order to convert it into a mosque, and the building was chosen precisely because of its orientation towards the holy places of Islam. This was done, transforming the bell tower into a minaret, while the interior remained essentially unchanged: the pre-existing sacred images were covered and just hidden from view, and a *minbar* and a *mihrab*, a simple new arch located into the apse but detached from it, were added.

The debate on the transformation of Christian churches into mosques is widespread, particularly in France where the Islamic population is very large and the shortage of places of worship is juxtaposed against the high rate of abandonment of Christian religious buildings[3].

Luca Giorgi

estratto

Evidently this problem does not arise when other end uses – ones that are more remote from the original function, from a symbolic perspective – are assigned to deconsecrated churches. The presence of a huge room, the hall, facilitates the use of churches as group meeting spaces. Thus, these buildings are often converted to auditoria, concert halls, exhibition halls and so on. Unfortunately, each of these functions requires public use, thereby obliging the community to ensure not only conservation and restoration, but also to recruit new staff for daily cleaning, care and surveillance of these new public buildings. As this is onerous, it is virtually impossible to convert all disused churches to public functions.

So it can be easily understood why a theatre is a frequently assigned function. It happened in Neuveville in Switzerland, where the Church of Preachers, a Huguenot temple built in the 17th century, has been transformed into a theatre simply by covering the altars with a removable wooden structure[4]. In Italy, some churches have been converted into theatres, changing the existing structures in a very different way: in Bolsena, the Church of San Francesco was transformed into today's Teatro Comunale San Francesco[5] simply by elevating part of the hall floor with some steps to achieve a limited visibility curve. In contrast, in Padua, where the Church of St. George is now the Teatro Ruzante, the transformation made by Gianni Fabbri was not at all painless[6]: an upper circle has been built at the level of the Gothic vaults and a strong new character has been given to interior spaces, adding new volumes and mezzanines and painting the additions in red. So the perception of the original space has been completely altered (Fig. 2).

Many abandoned religious buildings have had end uses that are completely different from the original. As previously mentioned, the hall size suggests new uses as public spaces (and in fact many buildings are reused for such spaces, but of a quite different kind): a large number of them have been turned into restaurants, pubs or discos. This happens on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the United States the Church of St. John the Baptist in Pittsburgh, a Catholic church, was deconsecrated in 1993 and three years later converted into a pub/brewery[7], and the neo-Gothic Episcopal Church of the Holy Communion in New York now houses The Limelight, one of the most important clubs of the eponymous chain of entertainment and musical venues[8] (Fig. 3).

Throughout Europe these end uses seem most common for disused churches. In London, the Presbyterian church in the suburb of Muswell Hill is now a pub[9] and in Ruigoord, a few kilometers outside Amsterdam, the old Catholic church was converted into a club for dubstep music[10].

In Montpellier the neoclassical Observance church, inserted in 2007 in the list of French historical monuments, has a façade with a facing of limestone ashlars, four tall Doric pilasters and a heavily protruding triangular pediment. The building formerly hosted a printing house, then a garage and a cinema. Since 1986 it accomodates the Rockstore nightclub[11]. To mark this new use, the back of an American car of the 1950s, a red Cadillac, has been inserted into the classic portal lunette (Fig. 4).

In Edinburgh, the neo-Gothic Elim Pentecostal Church, inserted in the Listed Buildings of Scotland, has been converted into the Frankenstein Pub (Fig. 5), with furnishings that, as expressly stated in the name, characterise the new interior room with a gothic-horror atmosphere that stands out from the setting in the old religious building[12].

FIG. 5. The gothic-horror atmosphere of Frankenstein Pub in Edinburgh makes unintelligible the original space of the neo-Gothic Elim Pentecostal church.

FIG. 6. The great hall of the Paradise nightclub in Amsterdam during a concert.

FIG. 7. The interior of Gattopardo Café in Milan, where the bar counter has taken the place of the high altar of the church of St. Joseph of Peace.

FIG. 8. The circus school Circomedia in St. Paul's Basilica in Bristol, with metal frames suspended from the ceiling and hanging multiple trapezes, poles, ropes.
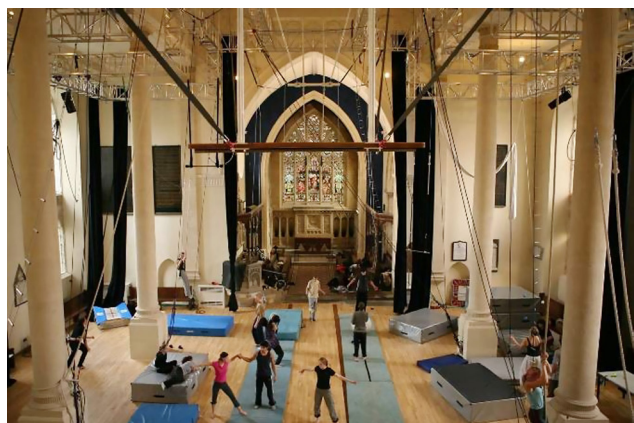
In Amsterdam the Paradise nightclub (Fig. 6), called 'the most famous venue of the rock scene in northern Europe', is housed in a former 19th-century church once used by the Vrije Gemeente religious community[13]. The building has not undergone big changes, apart from being divided into two rooms. The largest, hosting major rock concerts, holds up to 1,500 people. Similarly, the former church of St. Joseph of Peace in Milan was little altered (Fig. 7); today it has become the Gattopardo Café[14], a disco club and multifunctional space where the high altar space is now occupied by the bar counter.

Other churches have been converted into fun spaces. In some cases, such as the former church of St. Joseph in Arnhem, Holland, the building is now a skatepark[15]; in the Basilica of St Paul in Bristol[16], the old church has housed the Circomedia circus school (Fig. 8) since 2005, although curiously the church is still consecrated. It is worth noting that such transformations take place without heavy interventions on the building struc-

Luca Giorgi

estratto

FIG. 9. The wall paintings made by Okuda San Miguel in Kaos Temple, the skatepark built in the former church of Santa Barbara in Llanera in Asturias, heavily alter the perception of interior space, even though the walls have remained completely unchanged.
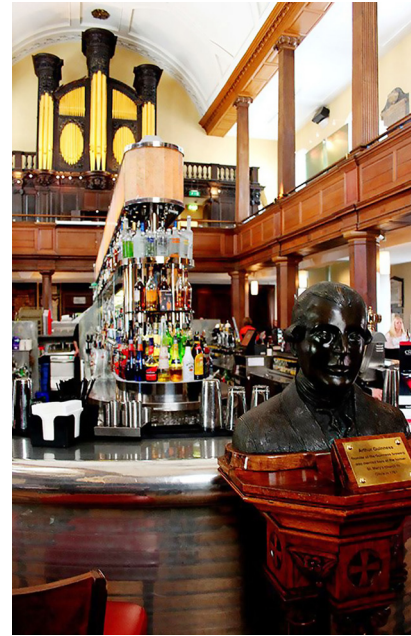
FIG. 10. The bar counter of the former St Mary's church in Dublin, which became the resto-pub The Church.

ture; in most cases the transformation is achieved by the addition of easily removable internal furniture. The reversibility achieved in such adaptations makes these transformations minimally invasive, even if the new function is very far from the original one. The Asturian Church of Santa Barbara in Llanera[17], also turned into the skatepark Kaos Temple is a special case (Fig. 9): the interior surface has been completely decorated with 'kaleidoscopic geometric drawings', a veritable rainbow of bright colours painted on all walls and vaults by the Spanish artist Okuda San Miguel, whose work has perceptually almost erased the original building interiors.

Minor internal alterations characterise other buildings: in Dublin, the deconsecrated church of St Mary's has become the restaurant-pub The Church[18], where the interior has been perfectly preserved and where the restaurant tables are located on the balconies on either side of the nave (Fig. 10); or in Antwerp, where the deconsecrated chapel of a former military hospital has been converted into the new The Jane restaurant[19]. In this last building, although the interior has been completely preserved in the transformation, the new lights, huge and intrusive chandeliers, heavily alter the perception of the space.

What happened to the 13th-century Church of All Saints in Hereford is quite unusual: in 1997 some parts of the church, which is still in use, were transformed into a coffee shop, the Café All Saints, and the main nave is now used for various types of events, 'from Shakespeare to flamenco' (Fig. 11). The church website makes the basic concept of transformation clear: 'The building is a church, a community centre and a café. It is a place where people of all faiths and beliefs are welcome to pray, worship, talk, eat a delicious meal or use the space for all kinds of performances and meetings...'[20]. The change was not

143

FIG. 11. At Hereford in the thirteenth century All Saints Church, a still officiated apse lives with parts of the nave transformed into Café All Saints.

FIG. 12. The all-white interior surfaces of the single-family dwelling, achieved in the former Sanct Jacobus church in Utrecht building new floors and partitions.
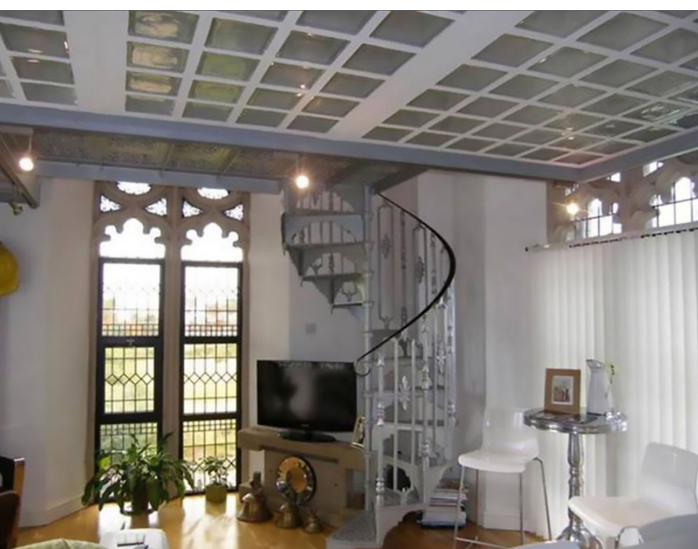
FIGS. 13A-13B. St. Georges Church in Manchester, divided into several flats and a room of the dwelling located in the nine levels of the bell tower.

painless: it entailed the creation of a loft in the aisle to make room for coffee tables, new glass entrance gates, wooden walls to define the space, a stairs leading from the nave to the loft, and raising the floor in the café area.

In Italy too there are examples of abandoned religious buildings used for similar purposes. This is the case with the old single-hall church of Santa Felicita in Verona[21], now the restaurant The Sacristy: here the apse was transformed into the kitchen, creating a loft over part of the nave, while preserving some fresco and stucco fragments, though most of them have been removed and are now preserved in museums.

Although it might seem that residential use, which typically requires small rooms, would conflict with the main feature of the religious buildings – namely the large room of the hall and its considerable height – some disused churches have been adapted for

FIG. 14. A prized suite of Martin's Patershof Hotel in Mechelen is drawn in the upper part of the apse of the former church of Friars Minor.

residence. Two opposing examples are worth pointing out: the Church of Sanct Jacobus in Utrecht[22], adapted by Zecc Architects into a single family dwelling (Fig. 12) with an area of almost 700 square metres, and the large St. George's Church in Manchester[23], which has been partitioned into many apartments. The most valuable (at least according to the sale price) is located inside the bell tower: nine levels that are not even connected by a lift (Figs. 13a-13b).

The construction of a hotel in a disused monastery is a common practice because of the excellent correspondence (accommodation of multiple users in separate spaces) between the original and the post-conversion building. Unsurprisingly, many former monasteries have been designated for such a purpose. The transformation of a church into a hotel is indubitably less common, as it can only be done by fragmenting the large original space with new floors and partition walls.

This has been done in Malines, Belgium, where the church and part of the former monastery of Friars Minor has been transformed into Martin's Patershof Hotel[24] where the most valuable rooms are those located inside the church (Fig. 14). In Maastricht, in the conversion of the old Crutched Friars monastery into the Kruisherenhotel, the bedrooms have been placed in the monastery building, while the church has been used for services such as reception, the restaurant, the bar, and so on. In this transformation the walls of the church have been left almost untouched, but its interior space is now nearly unrecognisable as the heavy, high body of added services occupies almost the whole nave; the space is moreover altered by new, strong colours and by huge lamps, like great flying saucers, hanging from frescoed vaults (Fig. 15).

Also in Maastricht, a central element has been likewise inserted in the old Dominican church, now converted into a bookshop. In this case constructed to the right side of the nave, the addition creates a similar final effect, although the lower height and width of the new insertion alter the sacred building's interior space somewhat less; it is still perceptible, albeit in a fragmented fashion (Fig. 16).

The transformation of old churches into retail spaces is quite common: in Arnhem, a church of the early 20th century has been transformed into the Humanoid clothing store; with a loft inserted and painted white, filled with invasive furnishings, the space is now unrecognisable. In Bologna, the former Church of Santa Maria Rotonda dei Galluzzi[25] now houses a perfumery; its hyper-modern furniture is housed in the ancient structure, its columns and stucco capitals still preserved. Sainte Catherine's Church, the second largest in Brussels after the cathedral, was in danger of becoming a market hall until a very recent decision by the bishop caused the building to be reopened for worship[26].

As can be seen, the revitalisation of religious buildings or monasteries, where the buildings have lost their original function, demonstrates the relevance of the end use to

The reuse of heritage with 'symbolic value' and university research

FIG. 15. The vaults of the old church of Crutched Friars in Maastricht, now Kruisherenhotel Hotel, largely hidden by huge chandeliers.

FIG. 16. In the old Maastricht Dominican church, the body housing the new library shelves has been inserted in the right half of the church, leaving unchanged the other half and making quite appreciable the original interior space.

achieving a compatible utilisation. Compatibility can be related to the material integrity of the building or be extended to the foreseen functions.

Compatibility with material integrity should be the first constraint for any designer who engages with the restoration of ancient buildings. However, allowing for the risk of losing the integrity that makes these buildings unique and unrepeatable, functional compatibility can allow for a range of options.

If compatibility is understood in a broad sense, new designations for cultural uses (which are often attributed to abandoned religious buildings) may be considered sufficient. This factor, combined with the uniqueness of the space they offer, explains why many deconsecrated churches are transformed into auditoria, libraries, conference rooms and so on.

Privatising unused religious buildings may often be necessary, but this is to betray its first meaning, that is: a building for the community, often built with the contribution of all citizens. Introducing a social function does not betray this aspect, at least, even if the new use is profane. The destination of public use and therefore towards space reserved for the common good can – as well as avoiding profane uses often actually at odds with the spirit of the building – be considered in a broad sense to support the *genius loci* of the site, next to the intent of the builders.

However, if we want to recover the deep spirit in which these buildings were built, the goal becomes much more difficult to achieve. In certain situations it can nevertheless be pursued and least approached.

The freedom inherent in university research offers excellent opportunities to explore this matter, as shown by a series of degree theses in architecture discussed at Florence University.

Luca Giorgi

estratto

FIG. 17. Elevations and cross-sections of the former convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Stia, whose new proposed use fully respects the spirit of the original function as a travellers hospice.
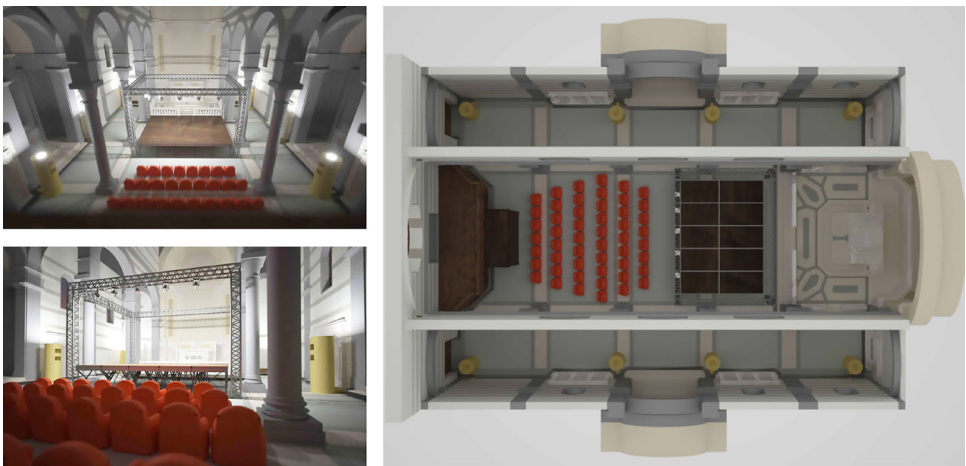

FIG. 18. Interior views and perspective of St. Andrew's Forisportam Church in Pisa in the proposed adaptation to a theatrical space achieved using only mobile furnishings.

In the study on the restoration of a Tuscan convent, the former convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Stia[27], a new use was proposed with the issue of recovery in mind: to recover the original role of the building in supporting pilgrims, it was proposed to use the building as a hostel devoted to the rehabilitation of drug users, today's lost wayfarers. The compatibility of spaces and functions (laboratories, residences, meeting rooms and so on) was established, and with a few necessary adaptations and interventions the feasibility of such a recovery of the original spirit of the building was demonstrated (Fig. 17).

The reuse of heritage with 'symbolic value' and university research

FIG. 19. Elevation of the right side of the church of St. Francis of Women in Perugia, for a long time housing a loom and featuring weaving craftsmanship, and views of the proposed reorganisation of the interior spaces.

FIG. 20. Aerial view, front and longitudinal section of the unfinished and abandoned Monument to Ciano at Livorno, whose renovation and new use as a Sailor Monument have been proposed.

Luca Giorgi

estratto

This is not always possible, but in other cases a careful study of the building and of its substance allows an adaptation of the old sacred building to new functions, to be designed with very limited alterations to the architectural structure and to the interior, at the same time ensuring that the original space, often of great architectural value, is still perceptible. In the proposed restoration of St Andrew's Forisportam Church in Pisa[28], a 12th-century Romanesque building, the current designation as theatre space has been maintained, with a new internal layout fully based on mobile and versatile furnishings, thus keeping intact the wall structure and the interior space of the church (Fig. 18).

The same has happened in the planned restoration of the Church of St. Francis of the Women in Perugia[29], which has long been the location of an artistic crafts laboratory (loom weaving). In the proposal, the current valuable use has been maintained with the spaces rearranged so as to enhance both the production activity and the ecclesiastical space: transept and apse (the exhibition area of handloom products) are reserved for the looms but visually open to the aisle, and the whole church space is thus perceptible (Fig. 19).

Equally difficult is the problem of new uses to be given to commemorative buildings that for various reasons (incompleteness, desire to erase the memory of their original commitment, abandonment) have now lost their original meaning. Again, the attribution of a function corresponding to the modern sensibility seems difficult to pursue, but the alternative – between ignoring the problem of abandonment or striving for a balanced recovery with the purpose of an equally well thought re-functionalisation – certainly lies in favour of the latter.

This is what has been envisaged for an unfinished monument near Leghorn, the Ciano's Mausoleum[30], full of negative value arising from its intended commemoration of a fascist officer, but in landscape terms significant because of its location on a hill overlooking the sea. A new and broadly shared dedication, for example as Memorial to the Sailor, could allow its symbolic recovery (Fig. 20).

University research enables us to pursue these ambitious goals. There is no doubt about the educational importance of research directed to this purpose, which can also make clear to future designers and restorers the feasibility of such choices based on criteria beyond the simple logic of the market, which is often the only one used to dictate the choice of new uses to be assigned to disused complexes.

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estratto

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