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Chapter 5. ‘The Best New Place to Live’? Visual Research with Residents in East Village and E20

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Introduction

This photo-essay emerges from an ethnographic research project, *Speaking Out of Place*, that examined experiences of living in the Post Olympics’ East Village residential development in E20 (see also Chapters 3 and 4). This series of images and accompanying analyses aim to expand and complicate existing East Village and E20 narratives. The images, loosely-speaking, are environmental portraits, but they evade easy categorization as intimate close-ups are mixed with anonymous distant shots, single people with groups, and eyes-to-camera portraits with documentary moments. The shifting perspectives demand varying responses from the audience, so the viewer is led through a ‘dis-coherent’ experience aimed at eliciting a questioning and critical response to the Olympic legacy story.



Figure 5.1 East Village flats, E20

Photo by Debbie Humphry

East Village (Figure 5.1) is the former Athletes Village for the 2012 London Olympic and Paralympic Games, now converted to provide 2,818 homes that are delivered by two separate housing providers, Triathlon Homes and Get Living London (see Chapter 3 for details). Triathlon Homes own and manage 1,379 ‘affordable’ properties (split between social rent, intermediate affordable rent, and shared ownership), while Get Living London (GLL) is a real estate development and investment partnership established by Qatari Diar and Delancey (QDD), and they manage and let the other 1,439 properties as private rents at the full market rate.

Imaging the legacy has always been important for the London Olympics (Cohen, 2013). The plethora of texts and images, from the bid to the Games and now for the legacy, has produced a heavily represented space. The predominant public representations of the Olympic legacy in East Village and Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park (QEOP) E20 are produced by official sources. All of these are unsurprisingly celebratory, given the interests of their authors in the legacy project being an unequivocal success (GLL, 2014; East Thames, 2015; East Village London, 2015; Delancey, 2015b; LLDC, 2015; Triathlon Homes, 2015a; Qatari Diar, 2015). Much quoted by these interested parties were the ‘Planning Excellence’ and ‘the Best New Place to Live’ awards that East Village won at the 2014 London Planning Awards (Figure 5.2). It is worth noting that the ex-Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, was a partner in delivering these awards (Gov.uk, 2015), and that as a personal champion of the legacy, and having tasked the London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC) to deliver the physical, social, economic and environmental legacy regeneration, he is deeply invested in the success of the legacy (London.gov.uk, 2015; LLDC, 2015).



Figure 5.2 Get Living London sign 'Winner Best New Place to Live London Planning Awards 2014', in East Village apartments' foyer window

Photo by Debbie Humphry

While there is an emerging critical literature on the 2012 Olympics' legacy project, as the chapters in this book attest (see also Armstrong et al., 2011; Kennelly and Watt, 2011; Watt, 2013; Vijay, 2015), there is little on the East Village (with the exception of Bernstock, 2014). The critical response to the Olympic legacy has included drawing on visual data, across academic, activist and cultural texts (Kennelly and Watt, 2012; Powell and Marrero-Guillamon, 2012; GamesMonitor, 2015), but none directly focussed on East Village, as might be expected since residents only started moving there in July 2014. This photo-essay therefore adds to the debate on the Olympic legacy, by its focus on East Village, and by presenting visual data in this

context. As photographs are more accessible to a lay public than written academic texts, the images are also well-positioned to counter and complicate the hegemonic official representations of East Village and E20.

The multiple perspectives generated by the ethnographic photography echo the methodological approach of the larger research project of which it is part. *Speaking Out of Place*, led by Phil Cohen, explores a multi-faceted story of living in the Olympic legacy site, drawing in the subjective viewpoints of East Village residents (see Chapter 4). The research team used mixed methods, including ethnographic observation and photography, in-depth interviews with residents, and three participative visual projects (photography, video and mapping). My primary role was leading the participative and ethnographic photography strands of the researchⁱ and, with Phil Cohen, conducting the ethnographic and interview fieldwork and analysis. Whilst this photo-essay focuses on the ethnographic photographs I took in East Village and E20, they cannot be completely separated from my involvement with the other strands of the research. Over time I developed relationships with the residents, and I drew on interview material to inform the photography. The images, therefore, emerged from my evolving relationship with the people and the place of East Village and, as such, can be understood as inter-subjective data (Humphry, 2013).

Taken over the period of a year (October 2014-October 2015), the images represent several phases of photography that reflect different physical and emotional distances from the place and its inhabitants. In the early months relatively few residents had moved to East Village, and the first retail unit did not open until March 2015. So in contrast to the full symbolic representations made of the place, the actual material

place itself appeared almost empty, both of inhabitants and the meanings that their everyday practices produce. East Village, and to an extent QEOP, seemed like empty film sets waiting for their characters and stories to arrive. So the photography began with me walking the territory, camera in hand, looking to see what kind of actions and meanings would unfold. The images changed as a result of my own deepening relationship with East Village, but also in tandem with a place that was itself only gradually forming as its inhabitants began to make lives there.

As a method, ethnographic photography was a useful way for me to think through the meanings being produced in the material, lived place, because taking photographs demanded a physical engagement with the people and place, and the resulting photographs provided a trace of the real to further reflect on (Berger, 1972). The photo-essay explores what these photographic representations of East Village and E20 can tell of the Post Olympic story. In the first section I draw on the more distant images I took in the first phase of photography, picking up Watt's (2013) questioning of who the Olympic legacy is for. I disrupt official claims that the legacy is for the benefit of East London residents, and suggest instead several other possible beneficiaries. In the next section I focus on the more intimate shots of East Village residents taken in the second phase of the photography. These images suggest diverse subjective experiences and provide a far more complex and ambiguous story of the Olympic and Paralympic legacy than represented by official sources. Therefore across the two sections I complicate, contest and deepen official representations.

Distance and disjunction: landscapes of E20

In the first phase of photography my incomer perspective is reflected in the distant shots of the sparsely-populated new-build landscape (Figure 5.3). The clean architectural lines, scarcely broken by human presence, present a sharp contrast not only to the over-representation of the official legacy discourse, but also to the traditional image of a busy, over-crowded and disadvantaged East London (Widgery and Holborn, 1991; Ackroyd, 2000; Koutrolidou, 2012; Cohen, 2013; Vijay, 2015). At a first reading this photograph may appear to attest to the transformed East London landscape of physical renewal as promised by the Olympic legacy discourse. However, the image's idealized aesthetic, produced by the clean lines and space, is created by absence, raising the question of who is missing from this landscape. Whilst this image was taken during the early stages of residents moving into East Village, it nevertheless raises the question of how many of Newham's E15 residents are accessing this legacy space. This is pertinent because, as Bernstock argues (2014: intro), 'One of the distinguishing characteristics of London's bid to host the games was its commitment to legacy where it was argued that 'the legacy would lead to the regeneration of an entire community for the direct benefit of everyone who lives there''.



Figure 5.3 The sparsely populated E20 landscape
Photo by Debbie Humphry.

With so few residents visible on the streets, the presence of workers in East Village and E20 was especially evident. Over time the photographs taken of workers included East Village security employees, community engagement officers, police, gardeners, builders, maintenance workers, jet-washers, a lift operator, a pioneer minister, a marketing manager and owners and employees of the new retail spaces. Whilst on the one hand this seems to affirm the increased employment opportunities promised as part of the legacy project, on the other hand the viewer is directed to question whose purposes this multitude of workers serve. The overall impression is that huge amounts of public resources have been used to ensure the smooth running of the legacy space, and that they variously serve the purposes of security, spectacle, capital and making further official representations (Armstrong et al., 2011; Kennelly and Watt, 2013).



5.4 Police on bikes outside Sainsbury's in East Village

Photo by Debbie Humphry

The photograph of three police with their bicycles standing in front of large images of Olympic and Paralympic athletes lends an ambiguity to the image (Figure 5.4). The police are lined up in a row, which echoes the row of imaged athletes behind them, and this works to blur the distinction between representation and the material, image and reality. This leads the viewer to question whether the police are serving the purpose of security or spectacle, or both. The photograph is evocative of the village bobby on their bike, a representation that is distanced from the image of a busy ‘dangerous’ metropolis, such as we might think to find in a disadvantaged borough of East London. It is not hard to imagine that the police on their bikes are part of the branding of this new urban housing estate as ‘East Village’, rather than solely there to counter crime. As the policeman on the right looks straight into the camera, a certain collusion with the act of image-making is implied.



5.5 Landscape
gardeners at work in
the Get Living
London forecourt
Photo by Debbie
Humphry.

Similarly the
photograph of
gardeners landscaping, planting and watering outside of the Get Living London

offices mixes the symbolic and the substantive (Figure 5.5). Who is the landscaping for? Is it to clothe the global real estate development and investment partnership in an arcadian neighbourhood attire?



Figure 5.6 Jet washers cleaning the pavement outside the Sir Ludwig Guttman Health and Wellbeing Centre on its launch day

Photo by Debbie Humphry

Another shot depicts jet-washers cleaning the pavement outside the new East Village Sir Ludwig Guttman Health and Wellbeing Centre on the day of its public launch event (Figure 5.6). Again the eyes-to-camera style of the portrait suggests the workers as self-consciously part of a publicity event, whilst the woman who is passing by in the background, unidentified and unaware, appears as merely an extra to the main event. Both images intimate versions of the Olympic rhetoric and display noted by Vijay (2015), aimed at representing the Olympic legacy in a positive light to the wider public. These images make the viewer aware of the labour and construction put into the building of the new E20 landscape.



Figure 5.7 A tour group
head towards the
Olympic rings in QEOP
Photo by Debbie
Humphry

A further series of images suggest possible benefactors of the E20 legacy. In one shot a group of people are being led on an Olympic Park tour by a man in a suit (Figure 5.7). This group tour reminds us that QEOP serves the purpose of spectacle, representing the legacy achievement (see the symbolic Olympic rings semi-obsured behind the trees). But the image of a man in a business suit is somewhat unexpected for a tour leader, leading the viewer to question ‘who has organised this tour?’ What is being shown and told? The ambiguity of the image invites the viewer to engage in their own analysis, and there is an implication of business and commerce in the story.



Figure 5.8 Workers near
Pudding Mill Lane station,
one of the five new planned
neighbourhood
developments in E20
Photo by Debbie Humphry

This theme is re-iterated in Figure 5.8 as a blue and white collar worker walk and talk together in a location near Pudding Mill Lane station, where one of the five new neighbourhood developments is planned (LLDC, 2015: 224). We might ponder the relationship between the manual and professional workers as the black and white males are juxtaposed in their different hierarchical roles, suggesting a questioning of how racialised and gendered labour relations play out in the legacy regeneration.



Figure 5.9
Professionals and a
patient in the Sir
Ludwig Guttman Health
and Wellbeing Centre in
East Village
Photo by Debbie
Humphry

Both these images point to the idea that commercial and political interests drive the Olympic legacy, a well-rehearsed criticism of the London Olympic legacy agenda (Kennelly and Watt, 2011; Armstrong et al., 2011; Bernstock, 2014; GamesMonitor, 2015; Vijay, 2015). Figure 5.9 further emphasises this idea as a group of Asian professionals cluster around a white man also in a suit, in the new East Village Sir Ludwig Guttman Health and Wellbeing Centre. The white man appears to be *showing* the Asians the Centre as he gestures into the dramatic, gleaming architectural space,

implicating that the purpose of spectacle is inter-twined with the purposes of commerce and care.

These figures are compositionally paired with the lone figure of a patient waiting for service, so that the viewer is invited to consider variant purposes of the legacy venture. The patient tells us that the Health Centre provides a useful service for local people, whilst the Asian professionals hint at global, commercial or career interests, with the suggestion that the Olympic legacy may offer benefits beyond the local community. East Village may be indicated as ‘the Best New Place to Live’, for where else in London would you find an empty doctor’s waiting room? But it may also be the best new place to invest or to work. Therefore the everyday here and now is pictured within wider socio-spatial relations (Massey, 1994). Overall the image can be interpreted to symbolize the public-private partnership mode of delivery of the legacy regeneration. Bernstock (2014) argues that the London Olympic legacy has weakened its commitment to a public-private partnership by shifting away from an equal partnership with the state towards a more market-led model, and the single patient outnumbered by the professionals suggests this idea.

Armstrong et al. (2011) go so far as to argue that the positive legacy discourse focusing on the benefits to the local community is deliberately used by the Olympic Legacy power brokers to validate their own interests in shaping land deals, contracts and developments (Armstrong et al., 2011: 3169). This renders my own ethnographic photography project with a particular responsibility as regards representing the residents and East Village community. So in the next section I reflect on the photographs of the residents, exploring what they say of diverse identities and

experiences, but also thinking about how this reflects on the social legacy aims, including the promise to develop community (LLDC, 2012a).

Close up contradictions: East Village residents

The image series of East Village residents develops the theme of interrogating representation versus reality. As with Figure 5.4, some the images of residents include Olympic signage, such as the Olympics Rings cushion on a resident's bed in Figure 5.11, and the 'Back the Bid' poster in Figure 5.16. Thus there is an ongoing reference to symbols and branding mixed in with experience and the material. In Figure 5.10 the real couple in the mid-ground are echoed by the idealized couples on the background hoarding, nudging the viewer to compare what is real to what is represented. The sense that the E20 post-Olympic landscape is a manufactured film set awaiting action is felt even in these portraits of the residents. The couple stand watchfully in the depopulated landscape, as if waiting for the director – or the photographer - to impose meaning. They hold their bikes rather than riding them, as if waiting for stage directions. The scene is at once formally balanced yet symbolically disjunctive. The distant line of grey East Village flats echoes images of communist-period, Eastern European housing blocks. This is then disrupted by the modern marketing hoardings in the mid-ground. Both these versions of the urban are further disrupted by the seemingly untamed rural landscape in the foreground. However the caption indicates that this natural landscape is in fact a constructed bike track. Along with the rest of the E20 landscape, nature is built in as part of the masterplan. The image thus speaks to the idea that both the Olympic legacy concepts and the material landscape are constructed representational spaces.



Figure 5.10 Couple on the Velopark bike track, in front of Chobham Manor residential development hoardings, with East Village in the background

Photo by Debbie Humphry

My deepening relationship with East Village residents is implied as the camera lens comes in closer. Most of the resident images are shot as eyes-to-the-camera portraits, indicating a mutual awareness between myself and the subjects. This draws attention to the fact that my images are also constructed representations. I photographed the residents in their homes, and also invited them to choose a location that was meaningful to them. Whilst this enabled a wider window onto their identities and shifted some control in their direction, the image is still a representation - albeit an inter-subjective one.

The images of the residents speak to the social heart of the legacy promise because the mixed-tenure housing provision in East Village is designed to address the housing needs of people from diverse socio-economic groups. This mixed-tenure character was one of the reasons East Village won ‘the Best New Place to Live’ award (GLL,

2014). And in fact the images of residents in their apartments do indicate an equality of access, as diverse people are depicted as settled and at home in similar quality spaces (Figures 5.11 and 5.12). Just as the properties are designed to be tenure-blind, so too the images are tenure-blind, because without captions it is impossible to tell what tenure-type we are looking at. The images therefore capture a key element and particular moment of the Olympic legacy promise to address housing needs, especially as further residential developments in East Village and E20 are planned to be delivered with lower levels of affordable housing (see Chapter 3).



Figure 5.11 Resident in shared ownership flat in East Village

Photo by Debbie Humphry



Figure 5.12 Resident in social rented flat in East Village

Photo by Debbie Humphry

The mixed community arising from this unique mixed-tenure development is also part of the social legacy commitment to construct community (LLDC, 2012a, 2015; Bernstock, 2014: 121-124). The concept of community has been much problematized in relation to previous UK political projects, such as New Labour's New Deal for Communities (Rogaly and Taylor, 2009; Wallace, 2010) and 'community cohesion' (Amin, 2002). In this context, the photographs offer an insight into how residents' experiences compare to political rhetoric.



Figure 5.13 Residents in East Village play area

Photo by Debbie Humphry



Figure 5.14 East Village Family in Wetlands, QEOP, E20

Photo by Debbie Humphry

During the fieldwork I observed community-building, through residents' own efforts and via official channels (Triathlon Homes, 2015b). Community events, for example, were funded by the housing providers and LLDC. Indeed, given that the ethnographic photographs, along with other elements of the *Speaking Out of Place* research, were sponsored by LLDC, so the images themselves can be regarded as part of the legacy bodies' efforts to construct community. The exterior shots in Figures 5.13 and 5.14 depict residents accessing and using community infrastructure. However, the different distances and amounts of space in the two images throw the viewer back and forth between a sense of busyness and emptiness, activity and stasis, nudging the viewer to question how much the facilities are used, and by whom. Most of the exterior images depict the residents in depopulated landscapes (Figures 5.10, 5.14 and 5.16), which

again suggests that these legacy places are not regularly accessed by wider Newham and East London residents (as in Figure 5.3). At the same time not one East Village resident has chosen a space outside of the green and pleasant land of E20 as their meaningful location. So we are led to question, not just who is missing from these places but also what places are missing for these people. A crossover between the pre-existing Olympic Stratford E15 and this new Stratford E20 is not indicated in the images, and this ‘best new place to live’ is represented as a world unto itself, far from the madding crowds.



Figure 5.15
Family in a
penthouse
flat in East
Village
Photo by
Debbie
Humphry

Uneven experiences across East Village residents are also indicated. This concept of living in a bubble, set apart from the less privileged, is indicated in Figure 5.15 as a family is pictured in their penthouse apartment, at some distance, across their rooftop garden, and removed from the density of flats and residents below them. Thus the earlier suggestion of equivalent access to similar housing is disrupted.

A look at images of disabled residents tells us something of the contradictions of the Paralympic legacy. Figure 5.16 suggests that the public spaces are well-designed to meets the needs of disabled people, as a resident in a wheelchair moves freely across the bridge from East Village to QEOP, her mobility on a par with the cyclist. However, this image is then disrupted as the subsequent photograph shows another visibly disabled woman unable to open a door in her block of flats (Figure 5.17)ⁱⁱ



Figure 5.16 Disabled resident crossing the bridge from East Village to QEOP Photo by Debbie Humphry



Figure 5.17 Resident
unable to open a door
in her block of flats,
East Village
Photo by Debbie
Humphry

Following this, the resident in Figure 5.18 is not visibly disabled but the overall impression is that she is tired and not altogether happy. Her pose, nevertheless, is alert and dynamic, not waiting for meaning but rather as if she has a story to tell. Her narrative was that she had become seriously ill and unable to work since moving into her intermediate rented apartment. Without the same protection and security offered by the social rented apartments, shortly afterwards she had to move out of her flat and out of London altogether. A sense of impermanence is communicated as her 'Back the Bid' picture is in its wrapping and unhung. Whilst the image cannot communicate the details of the situation, it nevertheless suggests that something is amiss, implicating different and unequal experiences.

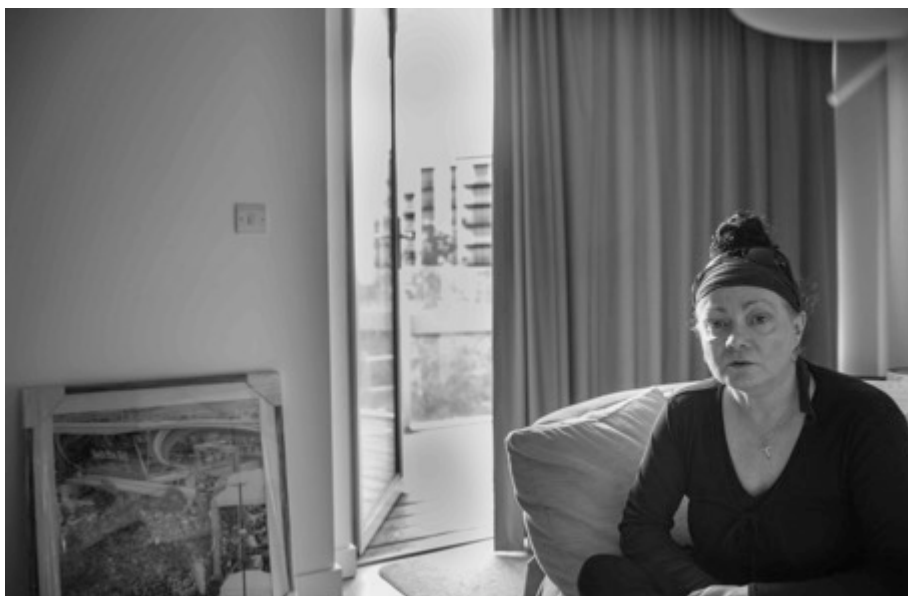


Figure 5.18
Intermediate
tenant in her flat
Photo by Debbie
Humphry

The emphasis on the Olympic legacy arguably fails to adequately highlight a commitment to a Paralympic legacy, and overall the images of disabled residents present an ambiguous, complex Paralympic legacy story. The individual stories are incomplete, but the photographs as a group, of three women each with different forms of disability, indicate differences in their access to security, mobility and independence. Any idea of a smooth or straightforward Paralympic legacy is disrupted, as is the more general legacy claim for ‘(d)iversity in housing provision to meet requirements’ (LLDC, 2015:11).



Figure 5.19 Two young men looking into the Neighbourhood Pub, East Village

Photo by Debbie Humphry.

The sense of ambiguity throughout the photo-series suggests that both positives and negatives can emerge from this place that has deliberately sought to bring difference together. This is symbolized in Figure 5.19, which conveys a sense of the dissonance

between different people's experiences and connections. Two young black men are depicted looking through the window of the Neighbourhood pub in East Village at me, a white older female photographer. The young men have variant expressions of connection and reserve, and as they both hold eye contact there is a sense of the different and dynamic modes of negotiation that encounters across boundaries of difference evoke. The image series overall indicates that a diversity of cultural groups live in East Village, but how this plays out, through cross-fertilisation or conflict, equivalence or inequality, may depend on how far the officials in charge of the legacy are prepared to look beyond their own celebratory representations.

Conclusion

Overall this photo-series disturbs a simplistic representation of East Village as the 'Best New Place to Live'. As the various perspectives across the image-set disrupt each other, a simple celebration or a straightforward critique is therefore undermined. There are echoes and repetitions throughout, but overall the ambiguities and absences provide no definitive answers and instead raise questions. Images function in a different way to other kinds of data, but whilst secondary or supporting data could fill gaps and add clarity, the effect of their absence is to draw the viewer in to the debate. The viewer is thus encouraged to question representations made of the Olympic Legacy, including those made by these images.

Just as the essay refutes the idea of an objective, coherent representation of East Village and E20, equally it refutes the idea of a coherent community, or a definitive place. In fact the divide between the represented and the real is itself troubled, as the images blur the divide between the material and the symbolic. The sense of East

Village and E20 being a film set, onto which action is constructed and meanings can be inscribed, is a theme that runs across the images. East Village and E20 is at once something concrete in the process of being made, a spectacle to be looked at, and a complex of representations drawn by variant interests and viewpoints.

This does not mean, however, that important material, representational and structural question are not raised, nor that the images fall short of addressing issues that impact materially on people's lives. For the key issues raised through the photo-essay are substantive and significant: from the importance of equal access to housing necessary to meet needs and build a diverse community, to the suggestion of exclusions for both the residents and wider Newham demographic. There is also a suggestion of the wider role that power, capital and their representations play in how the legacy is unfolding. Overall the images offer a series of ambiguities and differences, within and without the East Village community, structured variously by identity, housing tenure, planning design and diverse interested parties. By exploring these variant viewpoints via the camera, both the close-up everyday and the more distant sense of the structural contexts, the images are able to speak of the lived relations of place within wider socio-spatial discourses and relations.

This is a place that is more complicated and unformed than the phrase 'Best New Place to Live' implies. There is a sense throughout the images that E20 is a place both over-signified and under-populated, struggling to find its own meaning in the midst of the Olympic hype. My photo series is in itself an attempt to fill the place with something other than official hegemonic narratives. We are left with the sense of the beginnings of a place that has not yet been fully inscribed with meaning, of a place

that is still waiting to see if its promise can be fulfilled. As an emerging community and place there is much to play for - positives to be protected and negatives to be addressed - and in this context the residents and other beneficiaries of the legacy seem to be watching and waiting, poised for action perhaps, or already being agent, all party to this beginning process of place-making.

Notes

ⁱ For the participative element I delivered photography workshops with residents to explore their experiences of living in East Village. These culminated in a joint photography exhibition entitled 'MyPlaceYourPlaceE20' during November-December 2015.

ⁱⁱ At the time of writing, this resident has tried for over a year to get Triathlon Homes to adjust the door so that she could open it.

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