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Preserving Postwar Adaptive Housing, the Mémé by Atelier Kroll (1970–1976)

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Abstract. The architecture of postwar housing developments is characterized by a desire for formal renewal. As modernist models of residential bar and tower buildings began to feel obsolete, the focus shifted toward the user, redefining architecture as a framework for everyday life. Driven by experimental construction techniques and renewed societal vision, housing became an architecture in evolution, capable of adapting to the changing needs and lifestyles of its residents. At the same time, citizen participation emerged as an essential methodological tool. Collaboration between architects, landscapers, and future residents became a powerful driver of creativity, fostering architectural projects distinguished by their formal complexity and material richness.

An emblematic example of this approach is the student residence Maison Médicale (known as "la Mémé") designed by Atelier Kroll on the campus of the Univsersité catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain) in Woluwé-Saint-Lambert, Brussels. Built in the 1970s, the architecture challenges conventional norms in the field. Its reinforced concrete structure avoids the standardization of interior spaces. Designed in close collaboration with its future residents, the project is based on a flexible architectural system in which partitions and facade panels can be freely repositioned. Developed through a process of "open" industrialization, the components are conceived to be modified, adapted, and even rebuilt over time.

Internationally recognized for its deliberately disordered aesthetic and the participatory approach it embodies, this recent heritage stands as a major testament to constructive and material experimentation. Listed on the heritage register of the Brussels-Capital Region, it requires an adapted intervention that is both pragmatic and respectful, capable of understanding, preserving, and extending its intrinsic qualities in response to contemporary challenges. In this regard, it challenges the established criteria of international conservation charters by raising a fundamental question: How can the evolving principles inherent to such architectures be reconciled with the demands of material authenticity?

1. INTRODUCTION

The urban, landscape, and architectural ensemble known as Maison Médicale (or "La Mémé") was designed by the Atelier Lucien Kroll between 1970 and 1976, and it attracted considerable attention upon its completion (Commission Royale des Monuments et Sites 2017). It was widely published in numerous architectural journals across Europe and internationally, and it remains a subject of discussion today.[1] On September 27, 2017, the Royal Commission for Monuments and Sites of Brussels introduced a proposal to list this emblematic complex as a protected heritage site. The heritage value of this proposal is primarily based on the following criteria: the innovative character of the ensemble, the participatory approach that guided its design, its significance in the history of postwar architecture, and its relevance to contemporary twenty-first-century concerns—political, economic, and ecological alike.

It is located on the satellite campus of the the Univsersité catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain) in the municipality of Woluwé-Saint-Lambert, to the east of Brussels. The site—officially designated as the second "Zone Sociale" (the first having been designed by architect Jean Potvin)—occupies a strategic position. This complex of collective facilities provides a link between the university hospital, the faculty of medicine, and the medical school, all set amidst vast green spaces. In March 1970, the university administration officially commissioned Atelier Kroll. They approved the proposal put forward by representatives of the medical students—future residents of the site—to develop the preliminary design for their housing complex. This decision reflected the institution's intent to conceive an architecture aligned with the aspirations of its time, shaped by the protest movements of May 1968 and by the Belgian Walen Buiten student movement, which led to the linguistic division of the universities. For the university, it was essential to establish, from the earliest stages, a dialogue between the architect and the students in order to align with the objectives of the social and cultural zone complementing the installation of the medical faculty on the Brussels site. The Belgian architect Lucien Kroll's atelier was chosen for its reputation and for its long-standing commitment to active user participation in the design process. Atelier Kroll therefore organized numerous meetings with students to discuss the project's needs and aspirations. These exchanges gave rise to an experimental design approach, enabling the exploration of multiple ways of inhabiting space. Participation did not lie solely in the act of creation itself, but rather in the very practice of architecture: a design that evolves over time in response to the needs of its inhabitants.

As UCLouvain was undertaking the construction of the new university town of Louvain-la-Neuve—a pioneering project that would remain a unicum in the history of campus architecture—the La Mémé project directly asserted its intention to produce a new, open social and cultural environment that could counterbalance the site's isolation. As with the university town, the administration explicitly rejected any exclusive student-only approach in favor of an inclusive one. Here, architecture was conceived as a "living environment," in which "forms are not static; they change in succession, always in unexpected ways ..." (Hunziker 1976, 69–80) (**Fig. 1**). This principle precisely corresponds to the theoretical foundations of Lucien Kroll's work, which conceives of architecture as an "instrument of hospitality": an open framework designed for multiple uses, gradual transformations, and the continuous appropriation of spaces by their users (Kroll 2007, 92–99). Today, more than half a century after its construction, the question of the building's preservation arises in the context of a conservation project currently under discussion by the university. The envisaged interventions will not only be driven by the obsolescence of certain components, but also by the need to improve thermal performance and adapt the complex to contemporary standards of student housing. These forthcoming transformations therefore will raise critical questions about how to reconcile technical upgrading and regulatory requirements with the preservation of the building's architectural intentions.

2. PERIMETER OF PROTECTION

The perimeter of protection proposed by the Royal Commission for Monuments and Sites encompasses all the buildings designed by the Atelier Kroll, as well as certain elements of the landscape. This heritage recognition, which does not limit itself to a single structure but considers the entire ensemble as a coherent whole, is motivated by the material, formal, and functional richness of the overall project. The programmatic complexity—jointly developed by the university and the architect in response to the needs and aspirations of the students—is directly reflected in the architectural expression adopted. This mixed-use program is articulated within a distinctive spatial organization, deliberately departing from the compositional norms established by modernist architects. Lucien Kroll explicitly asserts the autonomy of individuals, groups, and users. This intention manifests itself through discontinuous silhouettes and asymmetrical and varied forms clad in diverse materials—brick, concrete blocks, wood, fiber cement, glass, slate, and others—that confer a distinct identity on each building while preserving the unity of the whole.

The site is composed of several buildings with complementary functions. The most emblematic building, known as the Maison Médicale or "La Mémé" brings together cultural and commercial programs, collective spaces dedicated to student life, and numerous student rooms. It presents a clear contrast between

its two main volumes: the northern section, devoted to shared student housing (forty-six rooms), is characterized by a construction system allowing for great flexibility and active spatial appropriation by its users; the southern section (thirty-nine rooms), by contrast, adopts a more classical and rational organization based on the repetition of masonry walls and structural columns. Nearby stands the university restaurant, located in a low-rise building offering generous communal spaces. The Mairie building accommodates offices and a few apartments and hosts a primary school on its ground floor. At the center of the composition lies the Alma Brussels Metro station, a key element of the project completed later in 1985. Here, the Atelier Kroll reinterprets the Metro station as an open, outdoor space through which air and light circulate freely. Its roof forms an integral part of the Alma Green Promenade, which runs through the entire social *zone*. Lastly, located on the southern edge of the site, the ecumenical center, includes a chapel and apartments. It is distinguished by its tiered southern facade, which establishes a direct dialogue with the Cité-jardin Kapelleveld, designed by Louis Van der Swaelmen in 1926 and listed in the heritage inventory in 2024.

The entire ensemble is unified by exceptional work on the outdoor spaces, resulting from a close collaboration between the Dutch landscape designer Louis Le Roy and the architect's collaborator and wife Simone Kroll. The treatment of vegetation, combined with a sensitive manipulation of the topography, lends the site a lush landscaped character, transforming the user's experience into a true promenade alternating between planted areas and finely detailed mineral surfaces. Architecture and landscape form an inseparable whole, engaging in a continuous dialogue with the living environment. In this context, the loss of part of the landscaped mound—originally formed from the excavated soil of some construction site—is particularly regrettable. Documented in texts and drawings of the Atelier Kroll, this mound constituted an essential component of the site's spatial and ecological composition. Its partial exclusion from the protection perimeter, in order to accommodate an expansion project for the Saint-Luc University Hospital, not only altered the landscape project developed by Le Roy. It also affected the architectural intentions of the Atelier Kroll and reduced the quality of the green spaces that are fundamental to the everyday life and well-being of students on the site (**Fig. 2**).

3. PILOT BUILDING, LA MÉMÉ

The first building addressed by Atelier Kroll is the Maison Médicale. Here, they pushed the principles of adaptability to their maximum through a sophisticated material translation, particularly on its northern section. This pilot building accommodates a wide diversity of student housing types, including shared flats for eight to ten residents, duplexes, and triplexes. Faithful to his belief that each individual is unique and that each dwelling should reflect this, Lucien Kroll maintains that domestic architecture must adapt to the plurality of lifestyles. The atelier thus designs flexible and evolving spaces, capable of responding to the specific uses, needs, and temporalities of student life. This approach aligns with the concerns of the university's construction service, which considered it essential that students have personal spaces conducive to expressing their individuality. Driven by a shared desire for experimentation and for exploring innovative housing models in line with the values and aspirations of late 1960s student society, Lucien Kroll and the academic services agreed to adopt a pilot adjudication procedure.

To achieve significant flexibility while controlling project costs, Lucien Kroll drew inspiration from the work of the Stichting Architecture Research (SAR) group, led by Dutch architect John Habraken. This research is organized around three fundamental principles: flexibility, user participation, and the constructive distinction between permanent structures and infill elements. The goal of this research was to develop methodological tools allowing domestic spaces to adapt to residents' uses. In this logic, Atelier Kroll adopted the Tartan grid with square modules of ten and twenty centimeters. The building plan follows this framework: partitions and windows conform to a ten-centimeter module, while the structure—comprising columns and walls—also adheres to this modular logic. This system allows for the integration of industrialized components, including facade panels and demountable partitions. The atelier thus proposes a free plan onto which prefabricated elements are integrated. The window system includes twenty different types, while partitions are available in three widths: fifty, sixty, and seventy centimeters. Designed to be movable,

these components can be repositioned by the residents themselves, with only a few students required to move them (**Fig. 3**). The principle of allowing students to configure their domestic spaces is reinforced in the upper floors. Built with a timber structure, the *greniers* (lofts) extend over two or three stories and are conceived as large houses left free for user customization. This approach forms part of a participatory design process, fostered by exchanges with future inhabitants, and is based on a conception of architecture as a continuously evolving environment capable of adapting to uses and contexts. The apparent irregularity of the facades illustrates this design philosophy, which rejects any logic of repetition or symmetry.

4. RECEPTION

The immediate reception of the student housing on the Woluwé-Saint-Lambert site was shaped under particular circumstances, largely due to significant construction delays. On September 16, 1974, students moved into La Mémé while the works were still incomplete, and safety standards were not fully met. Numerous letters of complaint were subsequently addressed to the university administration. While most of these letters concerned unfinished work, some also criticized the architect's construction choices. The system of demountable partitions, for example, was singled out as fragile and poor at sound insulation, attracting particularly strong criticism.

In international architectural discourse, both the immediate and long-term reception of La Mémé was similarly mixed. On one hand, Atelier Kroll's work was celebrated for its audacity and optimism in what appeared to be an "architecture of disorder." The emphasis on user participation, both in the design process and in the successive transformations of their dwellings, played a significant role in its reception. This approach resonated with contemporary architectural discourse: despite the potentially surprising visual effect, conceiving architecture not as a fixed image but as an environment in continuous evolution proved to be a source of inspiration. The Woluwé-Saint-Lambert project was presented at the Venice Biennale in 1976, alongside projects by Giancarlo De Carlo, Aldo Rossi, Alison and Peter Smithson, among others; it was also discussed in numerous conferences and published in various journals and monographs.

On the other hand, La Mémé also elicited reservations and even harsh criticism. Some questioned the degree of freedom claimed by the project, describing it as illusory. Architect and critic Geert Bekaert referred to it as a "simulated anarchy": a staged freedom which, under the guise of participation, imposed its own constraints and, ultimately, its own architectural language (Van Gerrewey 2016). Other critiques focused on the heterogeneous aesthetics of the facades, lamenting the lack of compositional hierarchy. Overall, the project challenges established architectural frameworks. Lucien Kroll sought to develop an architectural language derived from uses, lifestyles, and collective dynamics. This approach directly contrasts with the Modern Movement, which he accused of "ignoring any notion of connection, complicity, solidarity, reciprocity, alliance, social fabric" (Resseler and Kroll 2011). In this sense, his work embodies what he himself termed "eclectic bricolage" (Kroll and Kroll 2012).

5. CONCLUSION

Following the proposal to list the site on the Heritage Register of the Brussels-Capital Region, the originality of the work in the history of architecture was finally acknowledged, at least by institutional actors and specialists in contemporary heritage. However, questions have arisen regarding the implications of such a designation: economic considerations, legal constraints, and concerns related to the autonomous management of the buildings are regularly cited. More specifically, some arguments draw on the project's inherent principles of adaptability to contest a legal listing, arguing that a work that is evolutionary by nature does not lend itself easily to heritage protection (Région de Bruxelles-Capitale 2020). In the absence of a rigorous reading of the work—and of the cultural objectives underlying the preservation project—the notion of adaptability may be perceived as unlimited flexibility, potentially leading to excessive modifications that are inconsistent with the measures established during the original design process, thereby endangering the architectural identity of the work. It is noteworthy that Lucien Kroll himself, shortly before his passing in 2022, expressed a preference for conserving the project in its current state, which may appear paradoxical.

These divergent views on the assessment of the work and its preservation reveal a key issue: the conservation of recent and evolving heritage remains a delicate matter, reflecting a process that has yet to find established disciplinary benchmarks and is still subject to various interpretations.

La Mémé thus raises fundamental questions about the limits of conservation applied to evolutionary heritage, particularly regarding the criterion of authenticity as defined by international reference charters. This case study invites a reconsideration of the boundaries of material conservation and identical restoration, envisioning a preservation project not as the safeguarding of a fixed state, but as the pursuit of coherence with the initial project, its intended uses, and its potential for adaptation over time.

The entire site was ultimately listed on the register three years later in October 2020. This listing corresponds to an inscription on a safeguard list rather than to full protection as a historic monument as initially recommended by the Commission for Monuments and Sites. Unlike monument protection, which imposes strict and lasting conservation obligations, inclusion on a safeguard list offers only limited and primarily preventive protection. While the level of protection therefore remains restrained, the buildings, still in active use, call for a comprehensive preservation strategy capable of reconciling respect for the architecture with contemporary standards of usability. In this regard, the Alma Metro station became the first Metro station—an essential utilitarian construction—to receive this status in Belgium, highlighting the historical and symbolic significance of this ensemble within the Brussels architectural landscape.

Notes

1. See, for example, *Architecture moderne en Belgique* (Puttemans 1974); *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (Jencks 1978); *Lucien Kroll, Projets et Realisations* (Pehnt 1987); "Ecological architecture of Lucien Kroll" in *Architectural Review* (1979); "Wiederholung ist ein Verbrechen" in *Wek, Bauen und Wohnen* (1988); and "Lucien Kroll" in the Japanese journal *Architecture and Urbanism* (1979).

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Biographies

Emma Simonin is an architect that graduated from the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL, Switzerland). She is currently a PhD student under the supervision of Professor Giulia Marino at the UCLouvain, Brussels (Institute LAB Super-Positions). Funded by the FNRS, her research focuses on the heritage preservation issues of so-called "evolving" architecture, using the buildings by Lucien and Simone Kroll on the university campus of Woluwé-Saint-Lambert as a case study. She is also a member of Docomomo Switzerland committee.

Giulia Marino is an architect (University of Florence, Italy) and PhD from EPFL (Switzerland). She is Professor at UCLouvain (LAB Institute, Brussels) and EPFL, Lausanne. Her scientific interests focus on the conservation of modern and contemporary heritage and the history of twentieth-century construction techniques and building services, including monumental heritage and architectural production from 1945–75. In 2007, she co-founded the Laboratory of Techniques and Preservation of Modern Architecture at EPFL with Franz Graf. She has lectured internationally and authored several monographs. She is co-chair of Docomomo Switzerland and a member of the Docomomo International Scientific Committee on Technology and ICOMOS.



Figure 1. Atelier Kroll, La Maison Médicale, Brussels, Belgium, 1970-1976. © Archives of the Université catholique de Louvain, J.J. Rousseau, BE A4006 CO 029-NP-CHW-100.1



Figure 2. Atelier Kroll, La Maison Médicale, Brussels, Belgium, 1970-1976. © Archives of the Université catholique de Louvain, BE A4006 CO 029-NP-CHW-121.1

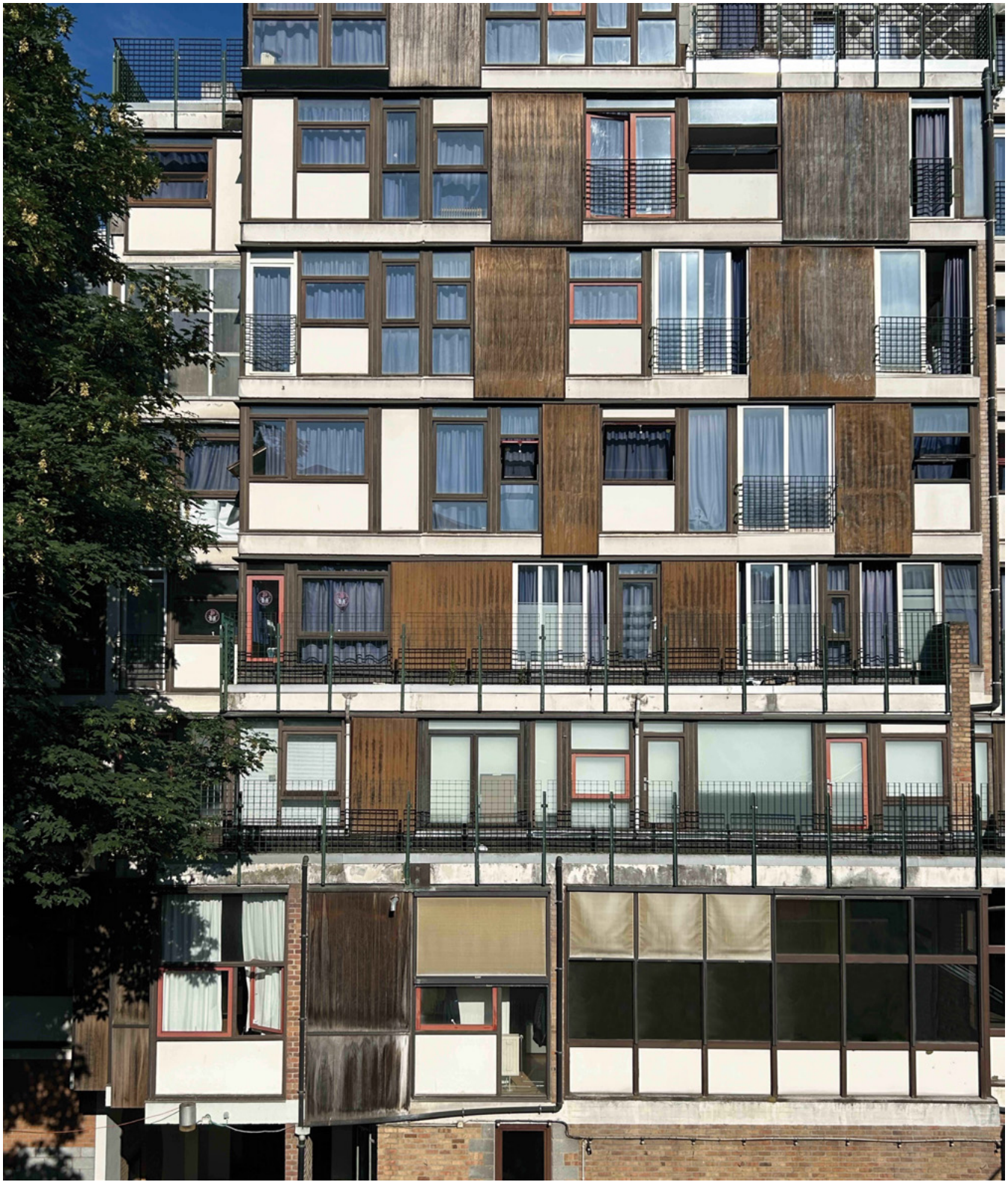


Figure 3. Atelier Kroll, La Maison Médicale, Brussels, Belgium, 1970-1976. © Emma Simonin, 2025.

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Docomomo International is a non-profit organization dedicated to the documentation and conservation of buildings, sites and neighborhoods of the Modern Movement. It aims to:

- Bring the significance of the architecture of the Modern Movement to the attention of the public, the authorities, the professionals and the educational community.
- Identify and promote the surveying of the works of the Modern Movement.
- Promote the conservation and (re)use of buildings and sites of the Modern Movement.
- Oppose destruction and disfigurement of significant works.
- Foster and disseminate the development of appropriate techniques and methods of conservation and adaptive (re)use.
- Attract funding for documentation conservation and (re)use.
- Explore and develop new ideas for the future of a sustainable built environment based on the past experiences of the Modern Movement.

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Our Mission
Pushing boundaries to preserve modern architecture, landscapes, and design through principled advocacy, collaboration, and celebration

Our Vision
A world where people value modern heritage and use it to shape vibrant communities

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The 19th International Docomomo Conference, entitled "Multiple Moderns: Climate, Community, and Creativity," took place in Los Angeles, California, from March 17-22, 2026, at the University of Southern California, LA Center Studios, and The Getty Center.

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