

FRONT DOOR – BACK DOOR. A HISTORY

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Abstract

The article brings into discussion the conclusions of a long-term field analysis on the housing conditions provided by the socialist high-rise districts. The analysis focused on some details that might be greatly improved at minimum costs, such as the main accesses to the condominiums.

The front doors had been always considered an expression of the owners' self-esteem and pride. They also represent a place of significance for the culture and tradition of a community.

It is pretty obvious that the way the front doors had been designed during the period between the '50s and the late '80s suffered from a decreasing respect for the people brought from the countryside area to accomplish the forced industrialization 5-years Plans, to be sheltered in the new housing districts, and an increasing struggle to reduce by all means the costs of construction, reflected in poorer and poorer finishes and plumbing's but less in structures that proved to be resistant during the big earthquakes of 1977 and 1990.

Thus, the analysis intended to provide an initial limited set of criteria for the evaluation of the front doors from different points of view and basis for the decisions on minimal interventions to improve the quality of these significant elements, with consequences to be expected on the quality of housing conditions for the residents.

Keywords: front door, culture, communist blocks, housing conditions, design, urban planning

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to describe a minimal set of evaluation tools to help better decisions in case of small interventions in demi-public and public spaces in the socialist high-rise housing districts.

It will basically approach the problem of the main entrances, and to some point the service accesses of the condominiums, and it is the first of a short series that intends to highlight other aspects of these neighbourhoods, among which: the distribution of apartment buildings inside the *insulae* by age and significance,

waste management problems and solutions, happening vs. planned loisir, and car parking needs and solving.

Tempting themes are also the spread of wild vegetation vs. shy amateur gardening around the blocks-of-flats, as well as symbols and aesthetics in mass housing construction.

They all aim to provide to the residents' associations (owners/tenants) and local authorities (if interested) a support for better targetted future projects.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology was based on field analysis and observation of a number of issues in their evolution, taking into account mainly the quick-view evaluation, but also users' attitude/behaviour.

The site analysis started in the summer of 2021 by identifying the patterns of the housing buildings in some areas of a socialist district. These areas had been defined around the housing buildings of similar sections and construction period, with similar physical characteristics in terms of height, orientation and distances between the blocks and with vegetation of almost same age, density and shape.

Careful analysis had been developed on weekly basis, as some of the aspects/elements that had been observed do change throughout the seasons, like sunlight brightness and shadowing, and foliage.

Besides the analysis, the documentation was very important in understanding the differences from a construction period to another. Romanian articles and books of architecture and urban design (published especially during the first decades of the socialist/communist regime) provided a great help in perceiving the districts, buildings and their elements as the results of a new ideology tormented later by the chase for savings.

CONTEXT

A quick view on the appearance and evolution of the large multileveled housing districts in the Romanian big cities, following the post-war years, would provide an intriguing perspective over the housing mass construction.

The socialist Utopia reached its pick at the time when reporting the results of the production (in agriculture, industry, culture, construction etc.) as they could be found in the 2-hours/day TV programmes and in the daily newspapers of those years (*România Liberă*, *Informația*, *Scânteia*, *Scânteia Tineretului* and others) was launched so far from reality, that seemed pretty hard to distinguish the truth.

Yet a good and profound literature in the field of architecture and urban design demonstrates the way professionals managed to maintain the high standards in designing the new assemblies which developed the demi-rural post-war surroundings of the big cities, moving later, in the '70s and '80s to reshape the city centres and the large boulevards.

A brief analysis would suggest that during the early years of the socialist regime, the Romanian architects' work was very much dedicated both to the fulfilment of the clients' demand and needs – the clients being institutes, unions etc., so the projects were unique by that time – and to the architectural expression of the new multileveled housing systems, which were not a new concept, but an existing one, yet at a new scale and in a new approach.

Their research work was also reflected in compendiums of rules and standards (STAS) to guide the designing process towards a better quality of life.

The literature in the urban planning field turned often to the housing problems, as housing is the most spread and challenging urban function.

Ensuring also green areas was not just a statement and did not resume to a minimal area per person, but went into details such as species increasing lightning by best sunlight foliage reflection (among which poplar, maple and linden were especially recommended) and by season (in autumn yellow leaves reflecting more light than the green ones in summer), and the importance of fountains and water surfaces in diminishing the noise level in cities was thoroughly discussed with scientific arguments. Compact tree planting was also encouraged by real data showing a significant difference between the temperature in the air and the temperature of the leaves (3-5°C) and that of the leaves and the temperature of the walls and pavements (12-14°C), providing the average comfort temperature for the human body, considered to be at 18-21°C [1].

All these rules and details were conceived to supply healthy housing solutions during the beginning of the communist regime: natural light for a minimal duration at the winter solstice, minimal distances between constructions, both for health reasons and earthquake protection; many other aspects had to be taken into consideration in the designing process [2], most of them still being valid, yet many had been upgraded in terms of general urban regulations [3], urban development [4] and house minimal standards [5].

The aspects that had to be seriously studied before deciding the location and configuration at large and detailed designing scale, would take now a few minutes analysis, due to the present technical intelligent tools.

Later, replacing the quality with quantity and breaking some of the most significant designing rules for savings (*savings* being a very powerful argument in all those years but especially in the last phase of the socialist regime), determined a sort of... resignation? The professional message did not transmit any opinion on the output of the architectural designing work, being often replaced by a detailed and ambiguous description of the projects deeply transforming the whole country.

No conclusions – thus, no lessons to learn. More or less, a testimony of the dark and sad ages in the history of the Romanian architecture in communism.

These were my personal conclusions, beyond the literature I had consulted, some of the '60s - '80s writings, so my conclusions are not based on a study regarding the Romanian architects' attitude concerning the communist ideology.

And I also have to say that those books were great, abundant in illustration, with accurate data and facts (as architects always do, documenting a subject). The books were rare, expensive and difficult to obtain, but always of a high quality, and their launch was very much expected both by professionals and students. This I had witnessed myself, being a student in the last years of the communist regime. Thus I am one to testify for the high quality of the designing process we were taught about during our studies, the attention given to each detail, from the balanced compositions of volumes and façades to the care for the users' needs and comfort, which went beyond the design.

Following the 1989 change of political system, one of the most profound wishes came to life for the Romanians: to become the homeowners of their apartments in the socialist blocks-of-flats, the "match boxes".

While in the last years of the socialism the state intended to get even the plot under a sold house, transforming the buyer into a land tenant, in the first years after the Revolution, by selling the units, the state reduced its responsibilities concerning the privately owned apartment buildings. And the involvement still

decreased for a long period of time, in spite of the numerous laws and housing-related programmes.

It should also be mentioned that 1989 was around the retirement of the first generation of tenants, meaning that the “fresh new” owners had lower financial resources to support the maintenance and utilities costs in the condominiums, and poorer physical condition to undertake the tasks that priorly were more-or-less voluntarily carried out by themselves, inside and outside the buildings.

While most of the second generation often left their parents’ flats, districts, cities and even the country – in the ‘90s, for the suburbs or countryside but also for other countries, those remaining were not available to work around the houses or shared the same lack of resources, in an economy that gave up many of the well-paid jobs, such as in heavy industry, construction or mining.

A great number of pilot projects during the last decade of the XX-th Century showed all over Europe that involving the residents, from the very first stage, was one of the best ways to approach the problem of the degraded areas, providing also a feeling of belonging which went beyond the completion of the projects.

Yet in the following years, with diminished public and private budgets and a lower and lower interest, the condition of buildings and public spaces in the Romanian cities went down to the point of “reinforcing” the owners’ and public authorities’ responsibilities by law.



Figure 1.

Homeowners’ interventions – main access to a 5 levels housing construction built in the late ‘70s. Entrance to a municipal 4th category street

Source – the author

The front doors (and the back doors) are in the homeowners’ care in case of the buildings of flats privately owned, and in the state responsibility – meaning local public administration authority – in case of the social housing buildings.

The front doors are the most visible proof of different stages and attitudes of housing construction during the socialist regime. They illustrate the diminishing respect of the decedents for the people, as they turn from the entrance of an “institution”, of the “residential combo” [6] to the humble and insignificant entrances of the last communist years.

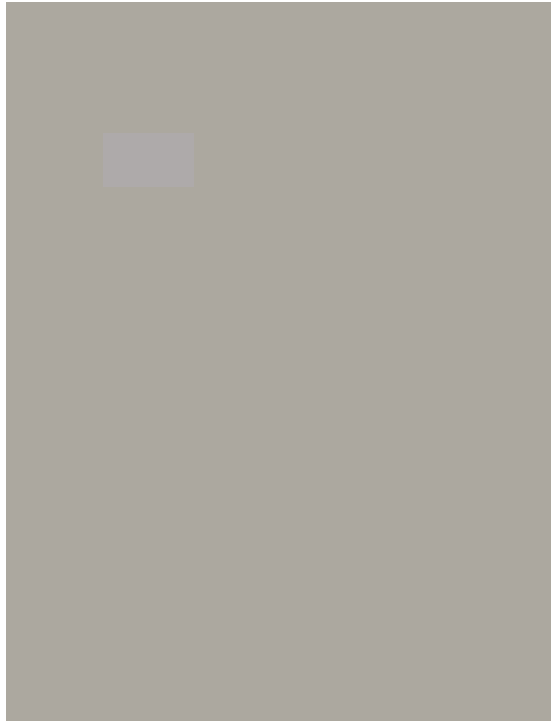


Figure 2.

Main access next to the service access of a 5 levels housing construction built in the '80s. Entrance to a 4th category street

Source – the author

Metaphorically speaking, they also were – and still are – the expression of the housing conditions, and people's strivings and empathy.



Figure 3.

Elevated front door of a 5 levels housing construction built in the late '70s. Entrance to a municipal 3rd category street. The remained sidewalk measures less than 0.60 meters width

Source – the author

Maintenance undertaken by the homeowners became compulsory in 2003, but, almost 20 years later, media introduced to the public the modification of the 2003 Governmental Ordinance as a new Law, with new obligations, as the previous act resulted in poor results.

RESULTS

Observing the present high-rise assemblies may be a pretty easy way to “read” their evolution according to the construction year, even now, when renovation of the old buildings resulted in fresh façades, like those of the new ones. Without any malice, sometimes the old once looked better than the new ones.

By overlaying the different conditions to be fulfilled and adding the aesthetical considerations to each layout, it seems easy to map the first developing projects put in place – large prospects between the constructions, proper daylight, fitted solutions for household waste, abundant tall and efficient trees, and generous green surroundings – enough to allow late street “modernization” (meaning “enlarging”) with increased parking areas, while still ensuring a good quality of life for the residents.

Not too much, not too many, the blocks had few recognizable features by shape, with an average of 3 apartment buildings/1 block of flats, 4 apartments/level and 2.45 rooms/unit for the 10-levels apartment building and 3.2 rooms/unit for the apartment buildings up to 5-levels (except for few studio tower-buildings).

It seems that the 5-levels apartment buildings offered better conditions, with their more expensive interior and exterior finishes (ceramic and brick tile exterior decoration, elegant wooden flooring, shine poured grout with marble pebbles, large and lightened staircases), suggesting a smooth transition from the middle-class Cubist apartments to the socialist ones. But there is also a big difference, in terms of size and facilities.

The first apartments built were smaller than the ones before and those to come, due to lower standards. So, a 3-rooms unit built the '60s is almost as big as a 2-rooms unit in the '80s, with only one toilet/bathroom (a second toilet being imposed by later regulations) and a small kitchen in which is difficult to fit the modern appliances. And almost half-size of the suites built in the '30s and '40s. And it is only the first-class comfort taken into consideration.

Increasing the living area per room and unit and the facilities in the years to come did not result in more beautiful houses, as the finishes were cheaper and cheaper, thus offering a more and more fragile and perishable aspect, façade decoration being included in the prefabricated façade panels, wooden flooring being replaced with linoleum and so on.

That happened in case of the buildings constructed during the great 5-years Plans. While the unit area became slightly bigger and the number of facilities grew, the front entrances shrunk and got lower and lower, losing more and more of their previous importance.

In the '60s, but in a different approach – the front door was designed to mark the entrance, with tall columns to support a canopy, in a pretty good ratio.



Figure 4.
"Monumental" entrance in the '60s
Source – the author

The first level was often slightly elevated from the ground (sometimes by inner stairs), not allowing "dialogue" with the sidewalks and pedestrian alleys. It may be considered a respectful approach.

Taking into consideration the way it marked the transition between the public space and the condominium, compared to the proportions of the whole building, the financial effort is not too big, but the overall result was very much different from that in case of the later ones. It signified both a limit and an invitation (but a well-controlled one).

Pluses:

- some "monumental" attempts resulting from the ratio between length and height, that determines:
- a sort of unicity in a uniform and neutral built environment, and also
- a sense of security.

Let's just say that this front-door solution was probably one of the best of its series, and none of the later solutions could level it.

Well, there is no intention to find values where most of the people cannot find any. So,

Minuses:

- no socializing space and no possibilities to create some, around the entrances, as long/short alleys to the front door are always narrow;
- no sitting places to rest or wait;
- no space for bicycle stands or any furniture at all;
- a sort of inside – rather than outside – orientation.

Yet combined with small areas of the apartments, these all brought people out of their homes and helped developing interpersonal connections between the neighbours, as well as with the residents living in the next buildings. Empowered during the "voluntary work" in the socialist regime.

These front doors of housing multileveled buildings of medium height, "on the ground", had been given importance accordingly.

The blocks referred here have also back doors, sometimes going down, beneath the ground level, with up to 5 stairs. These service entrances are usually locked, not being used, because of security reasons; blocking them is less expensive than ensuring with automatic locking systems, as the front doors have, in our days, almost everywhere.

Often neglected, these doors are forgotten under the wild impressive vegetation, covering them completely. But in some cases, their proper function had been restored, presenting them as tidy, clean, yet forbidden accesses. No other role could be seen for these back doors.

During the field research, a different series of front doors-back doors could be identified as "appropriate". So, number two might be considered the large front door of the 5-levels and the even larger front door of the 11-levels blocks-of-flats built in almost the same period as the previous ones.

A more elevated entrance platform provides a more "monumental" image, while the bigger width of the entrance and the entrance alleys allows space for other elements, like a bench or two.



Figure 5.

Front door of a 11 levels block-of-flats. Entrance from a first/second category street

Source – the author

Pluses:

- larger glass doors and larger glass walls to provide more sunlight and a sense of transparency between the front door and the (opposite) back door
- the outdoor stairs platform and the entrance hall provides the socializing opportunity for the neighbours
- an entrance-exit balance, openness, lack of restrictions

in the years before the automatic locking systems, this type of “embracing” entrances also attracted all kinds of visitors, including homeless people who used them as night shelters, especially in winters. Thus,

Minuses:

- probably the most unsecure front accesses, with a pretty fragile separation of the inside area;

- a large amount of unused surface, and accordingly, diminished area of the apartments at the first level;
- common design, with no special features, derived from a poor length-height ratio of the entrances.

Yet in many cases this type of buildings was conceived to become the home for the people evicted from one demolished urban area. Whole communities found a place to restore their social relations and the open front doors areas were often prolonged by benches, to gather the “grandparents of the block”.

A whole previous neighbourhood relocated on vertical.

But in the particular case of the back doors of the 11-levels buildings, surprisingly, the renovation brought to life their architecture to a level above that of the front doors. With the waste-storage rooms covered by pergolas, the façades turned to a clean and quite modern image. These back doors are rarely completely locked and they're often and proper used as they were meant to – to exit also in the opposite direction, avoiding long walks around these 5-7 or more block sections of a block-of-flats.



Figure 6.

Renovated back door to a service alley (5th category)

Source – the author

An even more surprising phenomenon appeared in some cases, due to the contextual circumstances, which suggested the idea of a switch (of importance) between the front door and the back door: wherever the back door is oriented to a larger and safer open space, the back door becomes the main entrance in the building.

This was the case of some late housing multileveled constructions during the communist regime, where the buildings were “squeezed” to fit in an area that left little space from the main street – with the front façade – so the backside access becomes more friendly and more attractive, safer for the kids to play around the blocks and closer to the parking areas, thus being more frequently used than the front door, which is more or less neglected. Obviously neglected.

It is also the case of the blocks surrounding an assembly of blocks, defined by several larger streets (more circulated), so the inner orientation seems natural and the back door/service entrance is used as the main entrance more often.

A sense of intimacy is also a must. A longer entrance alley to a less circulated street seems safer than a short alley (less than 2.50 metres long) connected to the sidewalk of a more circulated street, unless the sidewalk is pretty large.

Vegetation is important, too, as much as the outside sitting furniture and bicycle stands. The vegetation might act as a curtain, providing an effect of sheltered entrance. The outside furniture ensures a sort of "filtered" access. It also encapsules a feeling of protection and good household management.

The later socialist developments showed less and less care for the quality of the front doors and the common spaces and in many cases no back doors, in spite of the fact that the home designing standards imposed them.

It was in the late '70s and '80s.

In a number of cases, the front door stands also for the service (back) door, meaning there is only one access for people and in its closest proximity, the exit for the household waste, affecting the main entrance.

The one-entrance multileveled housing construction spread seriously in the second half of the socialist era, during the reshaping of the large boulevards and city centres, due to the fact that most of these blocks-of-flats had shops at the ground floor (and mezzanine), that sometimes left no space even for humble front doors for the residents.

Therefor the back doors also stand for main entrances when those were the unique access to the flats.

Besides the accesses observed, in direct connection with the communist leaders' decreasing respect for people, residents of an increasing number of blocks built on the spaces left between the housing buildings of the '60s and then of the '70s, the analysis provided information on the recent rehabilitation and modernizing interventions made either by the local authorities or the owners' associations.

Modernizing the streets, alleys and pedestrian ways was compulsory, as they were more and more degraded and this is not a field of action for the private stakeholders.

In case of playgrounds, parking areas, and especially for the green areas, the analysis revealed the fact that there is no landscape planning on large or detailed scale and the interventions are based on bringing sitting furniture and playground installations or planting trees along the streets and less on observing the itineraries, the gathering and socializing spots or hubs.

Therefor some of the interventions might be corrected but, to get there, a proper dialogue between the public authorities and the beneficiaries of these projects must be first established.

Being somehow on the border between the public space and the private spaces (condominiums), the front doors are not part of these actions yet, even an overall view of their rehabilitation is very much needed.

It might be concluded that, except for the replacement of original glass-metal walls and doors, often with plastic ones, which are quite inappropriate for a front door (private houses – even private apartments – do not have plastic doors!), the owners had only cleaned (re-painted) and decorated with flowers.

Renovating and improving the quality of the accesses in a coherent manner, according to the architectural style, architectural context and existing vegetation – which needs to be observed - should be made only together with the locals, by consulting and involving them.

It still is a sensitive issue and any action should take into consideration the need to develop a sense of belonging for each resident, as part of a great diversity that should be preserved, being the first and most important precondition for the culture of these districts.

CONCLUSIONS

Drawing the bottom line of this short analysis it might be highlighted that, in order to upgrade the most important connection between the public area and the private, inner one, some aspects should be taken into consideration for an adequate intervention on the front doors:

- a balance between safety, aesthetics and function must be kept.
In using new materials (although plastic was new and popular in the '60s and '70s), the replacement of old metal frameworks with thermal plastic looks cheap and inadequate. Besides, nobody replaces the inner apartment doors with plastic carpentry.
- By the time they were built, the blocks looked like institutions and the original construction materials and finishes still stand for.
- generally speaking, renovation should take into consideration the architectural initial aspect and select materials and colours at least of the same quality, as a minimal standard. More expensive finishes had been levelled with intriguing colourful paintings, miming the brick or ceramic original decoration
- lack of safety – for the less fortunate later entrances can be replaced with appropriate lightening, extended entrance hall, safety systems.
- humble accesses might be corrected with additional architectural elements which might provide a sense of identity
- yet any other intervention – such as enlarging the entrance alleys, outside furniture, socializing hubs etc. should be planned only with the users.

The field analysis proved that there is a difference between the planification – in terms of modernizing (streets, alleys, green squares and public gardens) – and the way people use these spaces, according to their needs.

The following Table 1 represents an attempt to organize the main aspects observed during the field research and assign them some physical features to enable their evaluation and to draw the intervention directions.

Deliberately it does not take into consideration the physical condition of the elements/buildings – as this is not an analysis based on this type of prioritization (urge), but on aesthetics, security, energy efficiency, socializing opportunities ensured and waste disposal systems in relation with the (main) entrances of the housing buildings. All these issues are connected to the significance of the front-doors.

The Table may be developed with other elements of interest.

The evaluation system may be substantialized with scores to provide an overall result of the analysis and with an interpretation guideline.

Table 1. Front doors - description and classification. Suggestions for minimal interventions. Data and information provided by the field analysis. Source – the author

ISSUE	EVALUATION			SUGGESTED INTERVENTION
	GOOD (0)	MEDIUM (1)	BAD (2)	
Aesthetics (geometrical features of the entrance):				
- height/length ratio of the façade and height/length ratio of the entrance door	1.6-2	1.4-1.6	< 1.4 > 2	(0) – maintenance (1) – add vertical elements to highlight height (2) – reshape to at least “golden ratio”
- alley and front-door width	> 1.5 m	1.2-1.5 m	< 1.2 m	(0) – maintenance (1) – remove borderline elements (borders, fences, green fences) (2) – enlarge alley and entrance platform
Security:				
- glass façade/opaque façade	<50%	50-75%	>75%	(0) – maintenance (1) – reshape elements (door, windows) (2) – reshape elements and consider adding security elements (glass bricks, steel grids, masonry, according to an architectural study and project)
- niches/dark areas	< 0.36 sqm	0.36-1.00 sqm	> 1.00 sqm	(0) – maintenance, consider placing furniture in the empty spots (planters, bicycle stand) (1) – provide proper lightening (2) – add security elements and additional lightening; secure the entrance platform (enclose)
Energy efficiency:				
- façade finishes, joinery etc.	High energy efficient materials (sustainable)	Mixed	Low energy efficient materials	(0) – maintenance (1) – consider increasing energy efficiency by replacing the low energy efficient materials (2) – consider general rehabilitation and/or reshape the building envelope
- lightning	Sustainable system (ex. solar panels)	Mixed	Energy consuming	(0), (1) – maintenance (2) – consider replacing with more sustainable systems
Socializing hub:				
- indoor (ex. entrance hall, laundry room, basement, garage)	> 25 sqm	16-25 sqm	<16 sqm	(0) – maintenance, furnishing (1)– ensure noise protection for the residents (2) – consider buying a unit by the tenants’ association and transforming it into a rest room for the benefit of all members. Also consider provide legal pre-emption rights for the owners’ associations to buy apartments to develop social hubs
- outdoor (ex. entrance platform, main alley, square/park)	> 200 sqm	20-200 sqm	<20 sqm	
Waste disposal (in relation with the front/back door):				
- distance to the back door	> 10 m (waste bins deposit)	5-10 m (waste bins platform)	< 5 m (waste bins room included in the building)	(0) – maintenance; restrict garbage depositing outside the platform; isolate with green “walls” if possible; ensure selective collection (1) – consider securing with locking systems; isolate with green “walls”; ensure selective collection (2) – consider supplement hygiene measures, ensure odour control, permanent maintenance and proper locking systems; isolate with green “walls”
- distance to the front door	> 10 m (waste bins deposit)	-	< 5 m (waste bins room included in the building)	



Figure 7.

The only access to a 11 floors housing building of the mid-'70s. The entrance to the waste deposit room is on the right side ("protected" by the little wooden fence)

Source – the author

As the decline of the role of the front door began almost from the beginning of the socialist regime, turning this entrance to just another humble back door, metaphorically speaking that was the historical decline of life in condominiums.

From the notable differences between the front door and the back door of the '50s and the early '60s, to the (only) one entrance, of minimal height and width, often with the nearby waste collection facility/room of the '70s, there is a whole way down, with less and less consideration for the residents' needs and dignity.

The low entrance invites to bounding.

There is no elegance in exiting the housing building without going down a few stairs or passing under a pretty large canopy, the similarity with the entrance of an "institution", or a hotel (by that time considered to be another type of blocks-of-flats, for resting - Arhitectura magazine no. 6, 1958, p. 25) – being obvious in the first years of the new regime.



Figure 8.

Grand access to a 11 floors block-of-flats built in the '60s for small families, with 1-room units

Source – the author

In a reversed history, it took a long ride from the business-oriented housing construction of the very first years after the end of the socialist era, with minimal comfort and maximal benefits, to the nowadays assemblies providing all sorts of facilities, for real money, including modern architecture with modern building

solutions, materials and technology, fitting and elegant green spaces and generous yet very well controlled accesses, both for the residents and their vehicles.



Figure 9.
Access to a new 12 floors housing building
Source – the author

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Footnote text