

Variations on a Main Street: When a Mall is an Arcade

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ABSTRACT Sydney, Australia, is home to a regional variation on the mall: compact, multi-level shopping centres located in existing main streets, and close to public transport, rather than blank-walled boxes in a sea of parking. This paper describes this building type and its variations across the Sydney metropolitan area. It examines some dilemmas for urban design scholarship, which has focused on North American mall prototypes and glossed over regional variations.

Burwood in Sydney, Australia, is a middle-ring suburb spread out along a railway line, cut by a major highway, and with a vibrant shopping centre set in the remnants of a nineteenth-century main street. It is like many suburbs in Sydney. The street is a bustling one with buses, pedestrians, and cars in a constant stream. The train station divides the busiest part of the main street in half; in each direction are butchers, banks, bakeries, cafés and clothing stores. On the side streets are dry cleaners and copy shops, government buildings and corporate offices, hairdressers and professional suites. Arcades lead back to an Indian video store, a deli and a handicrafts shop. Through one arcade is a mall, fronting a side street, with multi-level parking to the rear, and hidden on two sides by shops and offices. This is a mall anchored by a supermarket and a discount store, with around 50 shops: delis and doughnut places, greengrocers and butchers, gift stores and electrical stores, fabric shops and pharmacies. A second mall further up the street boasts about 100 shops and a department store and part of it fronts on the main street, though most is still hidden from view (see Figures 1–10).

There are many other such indoor malls in main streets in Sydney suburbs like Blacktown, Edgecliff, Ashfield, Chatswood, Penrith and Liverpool. These are suburbs that have high, low and middle-income populations. They are located in the middle and outer areas and in the inner city. They are in the few remaining solidly native-born-Australian enclaves and in places like Burwood where half the population were born somewhere else. They have 50 shops and 350 shops. They are anchored by large department stores, by discount houses, by supermarkets and by all these at once. They represent a regional variation on the shopping mall: compact, multi-level shopping centres located in existing main streets and close to public transport, rather than blank-walled boxes in a sea of parking.

In the past decade, urban design scholarship on enclosed shopping centres has focused on a particular kind of North American shopping centre prototype—the separate box floating in a sea of parking. This paper first outlines this dominant image of the enclosed shopping centre. It then describes an alternative, the

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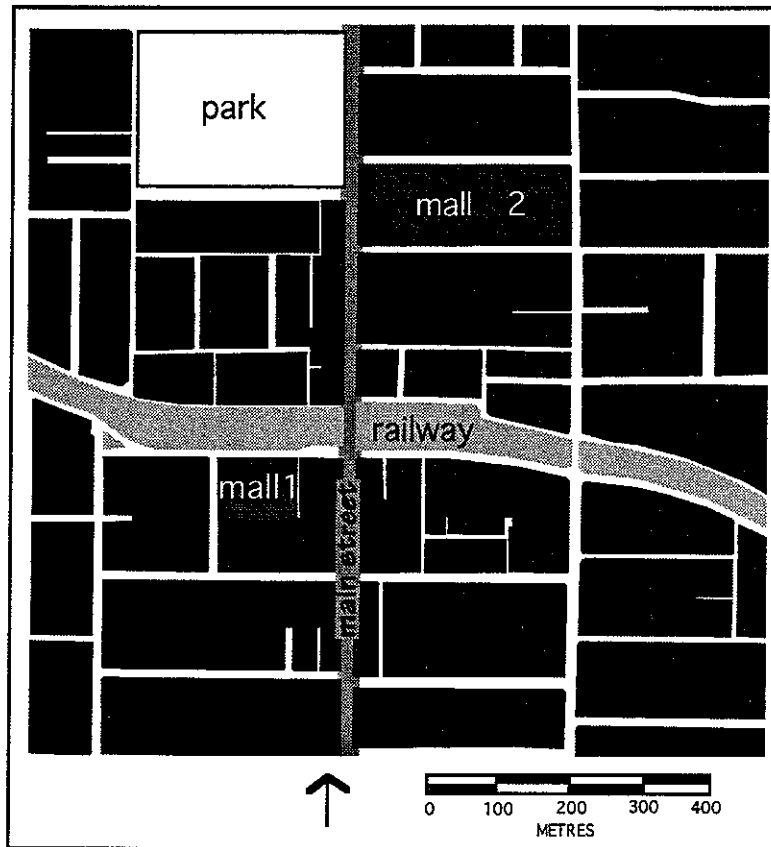


Figure 1. Plan of Burwood showing malls.

main-street-mall type, and examines why this form of shopping centre has developed in Sydney. It finally explores why the international literature has focused on the box-style buildings, or the quite different festival market-place, and downplayed other types. It argues that diversity in shopping centre design is important to understand and proposes that a preoccupation with the most extreme versions of the shopping centre type has obscured alternatives.

In the recent literature on enclosed shopping centres and urban design, one type of design dominates. This is the mall that exists "in isolation, connected to everything else only via the road, and the road [is] often the type of multilane highway that a pedestrian or bicycle rider might use only at peril" (Kunstler, 1993, p. 119). In the USA this is a long-standing pattern. Even before Victor Gruen enclosed the Southdale Mall in Detroit in 1956, free-standing auto-oriented shopping centres were popular (Gruen, 1973; Mott & Wehrly, 1949).

By the late 1980s and early 1990s this type of development was ubiquitous both in towns and cities, and in writing about shopping centre buildings. Architectural magazines carried case studies focusing on the design process and the form of the building, generally in isolation from its context (Ranger, 1989). Psychological and marketing studies treated the mall as a, sometimes noisy, backdrop for behaviour (Feinberg *et al.*, 1989; Graham *et al.*, 1991; Hopkins, 1994; Rawdon & Willis, 1993; Rind & Benjamin, 1994). Organizations such as the

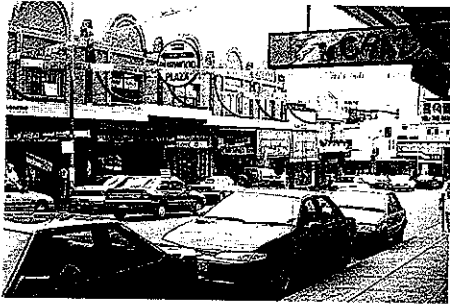


Figure 2. Entrance to Burwood Plaza mall's east side through an arcade (centre). A train leaving the station is visible to the right.

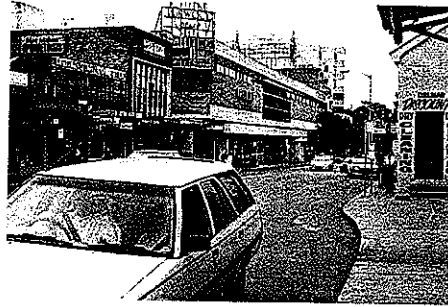


Figure 3. Looking from the railway station to Burwood Plaza's northern face. Bus stops are clearly visible.



Figure 4. Close up of entrance to Burwood Plaza via arcade.

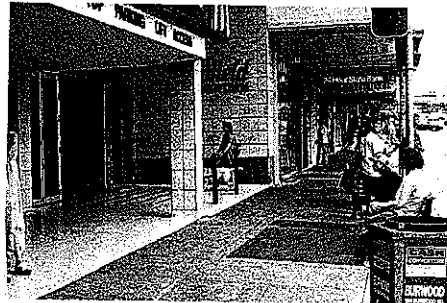


Figure 5. Western entrance of Westfield Shoppingtown Burwood on left, continuing the main street shops. Woman with seeing-eye dog entering. (View is looking south toward railway about two blocks away. This is 'mall 2' in Figure 1.)



Figure 6. Westfield Shoppingtown Burwood from the opposite direction.

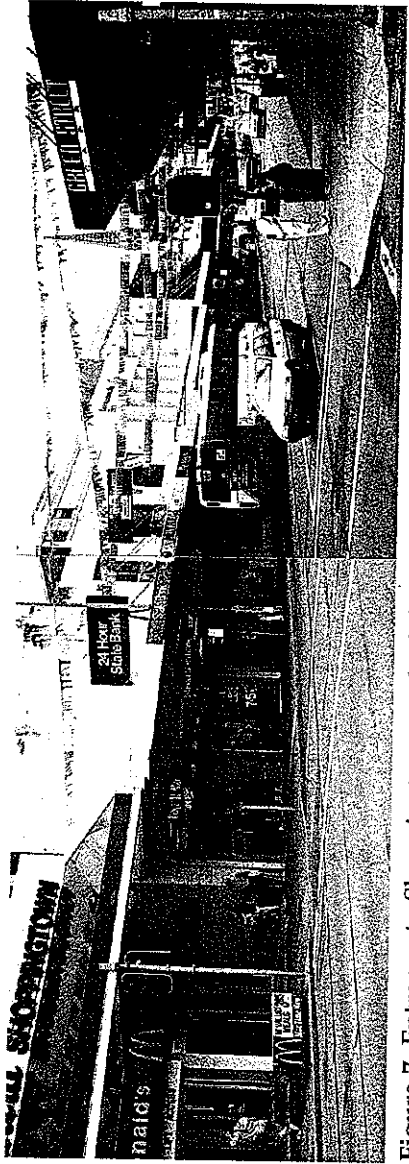


Figure 7. Entrance to Shoppingtown to the left showing continuity with streetscape to the right. Note the bus. The train is about two blocks up the street.

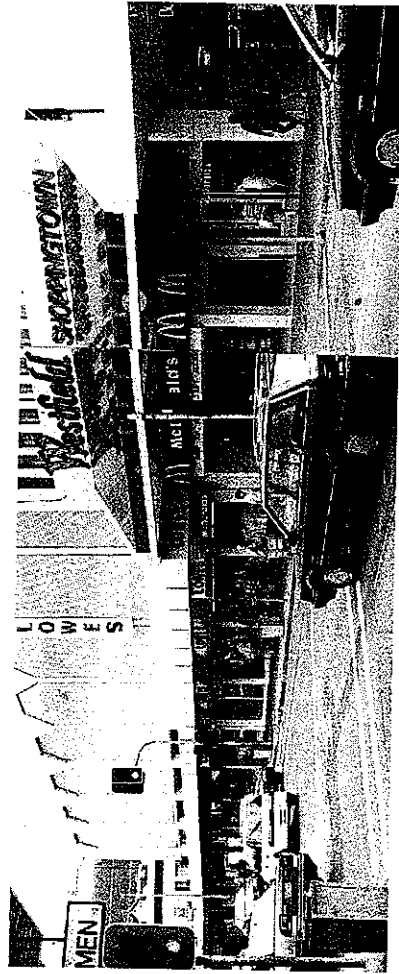


Figure 8. Shoppingtown entrance from the other direction showing ground-level shopfronts along Burwood Road.

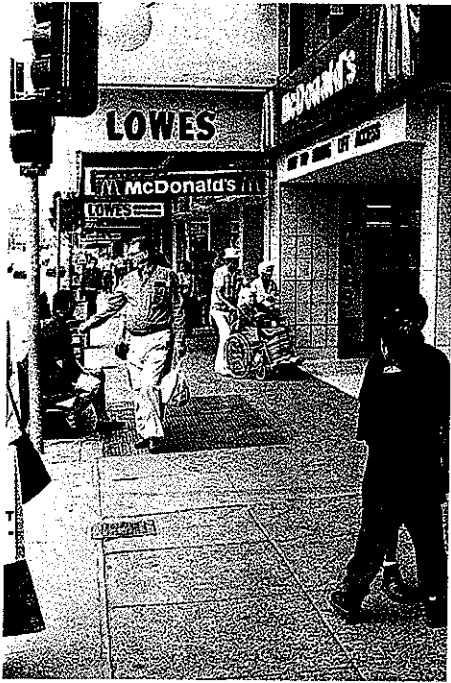


Figure 9. Shoppingtown entrance with a woman in a wheelchair.

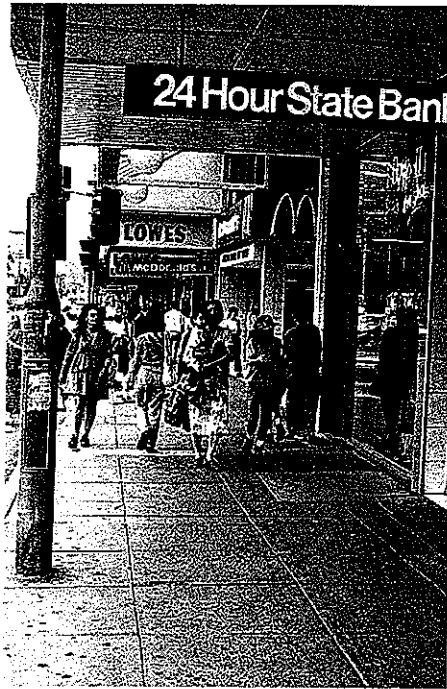


Figure 10. Shoppingtown entrance.

Urban Land Institute produced a number of trade-oriented publications on how to build malls; how to design the parking so people walk as quickly as possible into the building; how to design interiors effectively to get returns (Beyard, 1993; Schwanke, 1994). These dealt from time to time with alternatives to the box, for example, the 11-storey A and S Plaza in Manhattan created by reconfiguring an existing department store (Schwanke, 1994, p. 52) or Duane and Plater Zyberk's Mashpee Commons which although small and with surface parking shows the potential for creating a new main street (Schwanke, 1994, pp. 151–154). However, these exceptions were treated as just that, exceptions (see also Peiser, 1992, Ch. 7). The main deviation from this concentration on the box was some work on festival market-places like Faneuil Hall in Boston, specialist retail centres generally in downtown areas and without such staple anchors as department stores and supermarkets.

The professionally oriented planning literature in this period frequently avoided design and focused on issues like the public-private financing, traffic, and the negative impacts of out-of-town development on existing downtowns (Frieden & Sagalyn, 1989; Lorch & Smith, 1993; Rhees, 1993). Although Frieden & Sagalyn's *Downtown Inc.* told vivid stories about new kinds of downtown shopping centre development (like Faneuil Hall) and innovative design such as Horton Plaza in San Diego, the focus was on the development process and not the buildings.

The most engagingly written pieces were often highly promotional or highly critical work on malls as cultural space. Much of this latter commentary was set in the context of analyses of the increasing privatization and segregation of

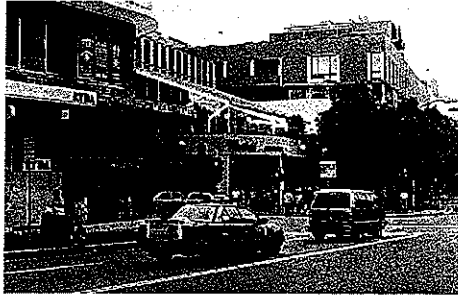


Figure 11. View of main entrance to the largest mall in Australia. Photo taken from bus stop beside Parramatta railway station.



Figure 12. Pedestrian mall (closed street) half a block from the Westfield Shoppingtown Parramatta. Pedestrians walking toward the Shoppingtown.



Figure 13. Main entrance of Shoppingtown, looking from the direction of the pedestrian mall.

contemporary US cities—walled neighbourhoods, security-monitored malls, shadow governments (Davis, 1990; Garreau, 1991; Knox, 1991; Sorkin, 1992; Zukin, 1991, 1995). Although some of this writing dealt with variations on the mall they rarely examined malls' urban design contexts (although see Bressi, 1996; Garreau, 1991; Lassar, 1995). For example Crawford, in an article on malls, listed a number of compact malls in downtown locations, as well as what she described as mall-like pedestrian streets such as Los Angeles' Rodeo Drive and Melrose Avenue. Crawford, however, focused most of her argument on interior design of large enclosed malls, on the 'ethos of consumption', and on general trends in North American mall construction (Chaney, 1990; Crawford, 1992, pp. 10, 28–29).

In the 1990s Sydney malls are rather different. Their context matters. Most front onto an existing shopping street and, for a pedestrian, entering the mall is rather similar to entering a shopping arcade. The majority are not set in a sea of parking: most have multi-storey car parks behind and on the roof. Almost all of the rest hug the street even if parking behind is on the ground. Over half the 90-plus small-type shopping centres advertising in Sydney's *Yellow Pages* in the mid-1990s were near railway stations; many of the rest, particularly the biggest, were near major bus lines. They were surrounded by offices and apartments. People walk to the mall.

This continuity with existing shopping areas is reflected in the language where in Australia the term 'mall' is usually reserved for shopping streets where traffic has been eliminated or at least drastically reduced, and indoor malls are more frequently called shopping centres as are the shopping streets themselves. Although some of these large centres follow US usage and have 'mall' in their name, others are 'shopping towns' or 'centres' or 'plazas'. So the semantic distinction between mall and other shops is blurred, just as the physical distinction is.

Some of these Sydney malls limit their entrances and have areas of blank wall, but many are wedged behind a row of ordinary shops, sometimes forming part of the mall building. For a driver, a mall is generally a way of connecting to these shops and the main streets they line. Pedestrians rarely notice parking areas in Sydney as the entrances to the shopping centres address the street. Although it would be possible to drive in, go to a supermarket, and drive out, this is by no means the major experience of Sydney's malls.

Although containing many shops, all these malls take up much less space than their US equivalents inside (owing to smaller shops and narrower circulation spaces) and outside (owing to multi-level parking and generally tighter parking design). For example, Sydney's Miranda shopping centre has 370 shops, in 109 000 square lettable metres, around 1.2 million square feet (Duffy, 1994, p. 30). This gives it more shops than Bloomington Minnesota's Mall of America which has 350 shops, four department stores and seven 'minor' department stores. However, the Miranda stores are packed into far less space: the mall of America is over double the size, boasting 2.5 million square feet of retail space and a total area of 4.2 million (Duffy, 1994; Rhees, 1993).

These big Sydney malls are often set on tight sites meaning high-rise solutions. The recently refurbished Parramatta Westfield Shoppingtown, set in the major commercial area for Sydney's western suburbs, has seven stories of car parking—on floors 2 to 8 (see figures 11–13). With four major and discount department store anchors, supermarkets, eight cinemas and over 360 specialty shops on five levels, a total of 126 600 lettable square metres, it is a big mall. Currently it is the biggest in Australia, but again it is integrated into the street and accessible by foot. It is right beside the Parramatta railway station, an enormous bus interchange, and Parramatta's central business district with offices and an open-air pedestrian shopping street. For those who come without a car there is a centralized home delivery service. Parramatta's mall has parking spaces for around 4400 cars while the Mall of America parks 12 750 (Rhees, 1993; SCN, 1994).

Figure 1 shows this model; 'mall 2' has around 100 shops including a department store, a large supermarket, a super greengrocer, as well as stacked parking. In the Sydney case beside the mall there are several public streets and whole blocks jammed with shops and offices, but in the USA these streets would be absent, replaced by a flat parking lot covering around two city blocks. A dense and interesting streetscape would be absent in North America, replaced by an expanse of asphalt.

Of course not all malls in Sydney follow these patterns exactly. Leichhardt's Marketplace, close to the centre of Sydney, has only a straggling set of shops around it but has multi-storey parking and is on several bus lines. Mount Druitt's Westfield, on the far outskirts, is next to the train station but has a lot of surface parking. North Ryde's Macquarie Centre is in the area that is the

closest thing Sydney has to an edge city, has a forbidding appearance, but it is next door to a 12 000-student university, on a heavily used bus line, has a great taxi rank, and still has multi-level parking. In Sydney, there certainly are large malls with surface parking far from existing shopping areas and they regularly feature in discussions on trends. However, they are not the majority experience in Sydney, they are an option.

In terms of interior design, malls in main streets are, of course, still malls. The interiors of ordinary malls are still enclosed. They follow trends in the USA: convoluted in the 1970s and 1980s with darker colour schemes, more straightforward in the 1990s with more skylights. Chain stores and franchises abound. Muzak plays and people get around using escalators, or more recently, moving ramps. They are closed in the evenings and after 4.00 or 6.00 pm on Saturday, reflecting the shorter opening hours of all shops in Australia. Not all open on Sunday. However, these are malls in main streets where other small shops are open most of the time.

By inserting many of its mall-type structures into main streets, Sydney provides the choice to use the mall, or the main street, or both. This is an important choice for shoppers and for store owners. Malls offer more climate control, more active management, easier pedestrian movement. Streets offer longer hours of operation, are on people's paths home from the train, offer more serendipitous encounters, have more variety in age and therefore prices of building, and are the links between arcades and malls. There are advantages and disadvantages to both locations but as they are so close together their differences can be complementary. This integration of shopping buildings also means there are few abandoned or 'dead' malls in Sydney. If malls don't succeed they are in such prime locations that they are renovated and reused.

Why have malls developed this ways in a metropolitan region like Sydney that has population densities lower than Los Angeles (Newman & Kenworthy, 1989)? A combination of factors appear to have worked together. When retailing followed the population to the suburbs in the 1950s it generally took place in existing main-street style suburban shopping areas with department stores opening branches. The first free-standing regional mall was built in 1957 and there was great initial enthusiasm for these car-oriented centres (Spearritt & DeMarco, 1988, p. 56). But in Sydney local and metropolitan planning controls on commercial areas have been tight and a series of metropolitan plans and planning policies has discouraged development away from existing or planned commercial centres. As Spearritt & DeMarco remark: "The state planning agencies have, by and large, been fairly successful in resisting freestanding shopping centre sites where alternative sites well serviced by public transport were available" (1988, p. 56). Of the 22 Sydney shopping centres in the late 1980s that included major department stores, only four were free-standing (Spearritt & DeMarco, 1988, p. 56).

Fewer local taxes and thus less local competition for tax dollars also means there has been little incentive to bid for these kinds of developments. Design philosophies and some cultural preferences for existing shopping areas have also played a role (Duffy, 1994, p. 31; SCN, 1994, pp. 26-32). Australian towns and cities have always had a number of shopping arcades 'reminiscent of older European centres' and providing an alternative pattern of shopping centre development, as a covered shopping street that connects with other shopping street (Geist, 1983; 4; cf. Hines, 1988, pp. 94-95;

MacKeith, 1985, 1986). Thus although Sydney has US-style malls, they have been discouraged and other models have been followed for the large part. This gives Sydney some similarities with post-war period European models where numerous downtowns or 'integrated' shopping centres have been inserted into the cores of both existing urban areas and in new towns (Dawson, 1983, pp. 9–11, 32–33; Gosling & Maitland, 1976, pp. 71–125; Maitland, 1985, pp. 94–108).

Why has this type of mall not appeared much in the literature recently? This absence is partly because the literature on malls comes from the USA and Canada where a particular form of mall has evolved in the past decades, particularly in the suburbs. Even in Australia, the Sydney pattern is not the only one: it is shared by a few Melbourne centres and by several country towns but not by many of the mid-sized fast-growing coastal areas (McLoughlin, 1992, p. 93). In Europe the fear of out-of-town centres has recently been dominant (Jacobson, 1994).

In Australia these scholarly and professional trends have been copied. Authors examining malls have searched out the biggest and newest examples for study, the ones closest to US and Canadian examples, seeing the rest merely as precursors or idiosyncrasies. Thus Njoo, writing on Melbourne, summarises the form in this way: "Instead of moats, acres of car parking spaces surround the bland and anonymous façades.... [L]ike McDonalds and Valentines Day ... imported American dreams" (Njoo, 1991, p. 10). Free-standing malls look more dramatic when photographed from the air, and developers also promote these images rather than shopping centres in messy main streets. It seems that the dominant image has at least partly obscured people's imaginations, at least as far as publishing about the mall experience is concerned. Once Australian cultural commentators started noticing malls, they could only do so through US stereotypes, as a case of malls versus main streets (Duffy, 1994; Ranger, 1989).

Thus, the stereotype of the mall as an isolated box set in a sea of parking obscures a regional reality. People are warning about an ideal type—the mall on the edge of town surrounded by an asphalt sea of parking—not necessarily about the common experience of malls in a particular place. This raises important questions about the use of ideal or extreme types in design criticism: do images like the mall as box obscure possibilities and solutions, even as they powerfully represent some part of reality? For example it is probably correct to castigate boxes in a sea of parking as eroding public space by providing few opportunities for democratic exchange. A mall in a main street is a different matter. The Wilderness Society and the Salvation Army can hawk their wares on the footpath outside. The situation is more complicated than the critics will admit. Moreover even the USA has a range of shopping mall types; downtown malls, mini malls, and so on. Lassar and Bressi show that planning interventions can reshape malls even in the USA (Bressi, 1996; Lassar, 1995).

Sometimes, however, an idea or an image grabs a population and becomes so powerful that when it is no longer true, or not true in a different location, people fail to notice: all suburbs are homogenous; all malls are boxes or fortresses in a sea of parking. This may be particularly true for less striking environments, such as these 'main street malls', fitting into the street, often with less than striking commercial architecture. By fitting in, they disappear.

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