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Soviet Heritage(scape) in Sillamäe: Documenting the Potential in an Emerging Tourism Destination

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Abstract: In 2014, the National Heritage Board of Estonia began the procedure for declaring the town centre of the former Soviet secret uranium town of Sillamäe in Northeast Estonia a heritage conservation area. The process is expected to be finalised in 2023, making it the first area where Soviet architecture would be under protection in Estonia. By approaching the town theoretically and methodologically as a heritagescape where components of tangible landscape are used to create a distinct place of the past, looking at how the town's official development policy relates to the existing representations of the past in the town's memory institutions, and interviewing local stakeholders, this article provides a broader and more nuanced understanding of Sillamäe and its tourism potential. Sillamäe as heritagescape offers tourists the chance to experience a curated version of the Soviet era and contemplate on the legacy of nuclear industry, while remaining in the safety of a resort town in the periphery of the European Union.

Keywords: Soviet heritage; heritagescape; cultural tourism; industrial tourism; Northeast Estonia



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1. Introduction

“20 years ago, when people passed Sillamäe—nobody could see that [central] part of the town. They would all only notice the Brezhnev-era district, right. “This isn't a town, it's . . . Are you joking, what are you talking about? We have driven [past Sillamäe] to Narva and back, and to St. Petersburg. It's such a horrible town. [...] There's nothing there.”—an independent tourism entrepreneur in an interview in Sillamäe, 14 September 2021.

In 2014, the National Heritage Board of Estonia began the procedure of declaring the town centre of the former Soviet secret uranium town of Sillamäe in Northeast Estonia a heritage conservation area. The procedure, which is based on the cooperation of heritage experts, state authorities, the local government, and local residents, is expected to be finalised in 2023. Once completed, Sillamäe town centre will be the first area where Soviet architecture would be under protection in Estonia. In this article, we use Sillamäe as a case study in order to examine the changing status of Soviet heritage in Estonia and its relevance for tourism. The town's complex identity is derived from its history as a holiday site for St. Petersburg's elites in the 19th century, as the secret elite town of the Soviet Union in the 1950s, and today as a Russian-speaking town in the industrial region of Ida-Virumaa, which has been described as “Oil Shale Land”, symbolising the Soviet myth of progress [1] or a deliberately forgotten utopia [2]. Studies of changes in this part of Estonia have focused on the establishment of mono-industrial towns [3,4] and on the valorisation of the oil shale industry legacy, specifically on the recultivation and tourism potential of artificial landforms [5,6]. Our research adds to the existing scholarship a complex case study in which visions of a resort, unique Soviet architectural heritage, painful histories, and present day fears of marginalisation meet in one place.

Estonian Heritage Conservation Act defines a heritage conservation area as “an area, a historical settlement or a part thereof or a cultural landscape developed under the common

influence of the nature and human activities” which “may consist of buildings [...] and civil engineering works dating from one or several periods together with the archaeological layer, natural objects, street network, roads, land parcels and structure of buildings and plots characteristic of the area” [7]. The exact area to be included in the Sillamäe Conservation Area is still under negotiations, offering an opportunity to look at the town as a larger heritagescape and explore its potential before the contents and the borders of the Sillamäe Heritage Conservation Area are set.

Despite a large portion of Estonian cultural landmarks, such as castles, manors, and churches being of foreign origin [8], the conservation and restoration of Soviet-era architecture has thus formed a marginal part of heritage protection activities. A similar tendency has been observed in Lithuania, where the Soviet era is first and foremost associated with large-scale industrialisation and its side effects—destroyed landscapes, pollution, low-quality products, and huge industrial complexes—which are not regarded “heritageable” from a national point of view that favours the master narrative of a rural and agrarian country [9]. Soviet heritage can therefore be called “dissonant heritage” [10], or even “undesirable heritage”, where the physical remains of the past offer up an identity that many of those in the present wish to distance themselves from, even while at the same time recognising it fully as a part of their history [11].

The status of Soviet heritage in Estonia, is closely linked to the social and cultural changes that accompanied the Soviet regime. After WWII, deportations in the 1940s were followed by the creation of collective farms and large-scale industries, the products of which were mostly exported to other areas of the Union. Prisoners of war labour and construction battalions were used to re-establish war-torn settlements, especially in Northeast Estonia, the Ida-Virumaa region, which had largely been destroyed as the frontline between the east and the west. In heritage conservation discourse in Estonia, Soviet heritage has been a controversial topic since 2004, after the Heritage Conservation Board commissioned architectural historian Mart Kalm to compile a systematic manual for the conservation of architecture designed in the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (ESSR) [12]. The manual was preceded by Kalm’s seminal overview of the 20th century architecture in Estonia [13]. Lack of attention granted to Soviet heritage in Estonia prior to this can be compared to the German response to Nazi heritage: calculated neglect, or “trivialisation” in the former German Minister of Culture Hermann Glaser’s words [11]. The Estonian approach has been described as “silent revenge” on the Soviet era through its material heritage: the most visible and most vulnerable manifestation of the past with the possible and plausible explanation of a general national-ideological background that has simply preferred some periods to others [12].

Post-Soviet transformation of the political system allowed individual countries to de-communise—de-sacralise, cleanse, reinterpret, and re-signify—urban space, including industrial areas, which, as massive conglomerates of labour, had been a socialist *idée fixe* during the communist era [14]. The question of the future of Soviet heritage, or more specifically, Soviet monuments, resurfaced forcefully in 2007 following the conflict-ridden relocation of the 2-metre “Bronze Soldier” statue from Tallinn town centre to a military cemetery, and again in 2022 when, in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine, the government decided to relocate the Tank T-34 monument from Narva to the Estonian War Museum in Viimsi. In both cases, WWII monuments proved to be “polysemic, symbolising liberation, aggression and occupation” to the people living in Estonia [15] and embed conflicting identities and narratives of the past. In a country where roughly 69% identify themselves as ethnic Estonians, 24% as ethnic Russians, and 7% as others [16], it may be convenient to claim that most people identify themselves also with the post-communist, post-Soviet narrative, but as apparent from the public reactions to the removal and relocation of the “Bronze Soldier” and the tank, not everybody agrees: both events were widely covered in both press and social media by comments defending or condemning the decisions and their execution. Beyond the interpretation and appreciation of art and history, for a democratic society, there is another elephant in the room: destroying the heritage of

the preceding regime would be not be only denying history, but repeating a communist practice [17].

The National Heritage Board's decision to declare Sillamäe town centre a heritage conservation area can be seen as an important symbolic act, a paradigm shift in a region where Soviet heritage has put democracy to the test. Soviet heritage, which for a long while was delegated to the "profane" or dissonant category, something ignored or actively shunned, is now coming under official protection, thus again competing for the title of "sacred". Adding to the research and studies of Soviet heritage by Estonian historians, ethnologists, and heritage experts that have dealt with memorial sites [18], kolkhoz architecture in rural areas [19,20], art in military bases [21], and other elements across the country [22], we examine the varied heritagescape of Sillamäe, asking how the planned heritage conservation area and the town's development plans relate to the town's varied past and how its history is locally viewed and understood. Examining both the town's representation and the experience of being there, we argue that creating a coherent tourism image of Sillamäe has been a struggle between three main narratives: the uncomplicated history of a resort town, a mysterious industrial hub, and the best-preserved example of Soviet urban planning in Estonia. This is the first academic article to juxtapose different periods distinguishable in the history of Sillamäe with their tangible representations, focusing on the challenges of transitioning from a semi-closed socialist utopian town to a neoliberal and open tourism destination. Our multi-layered approach also introduces the perspectives of practitioners to the question of how less ideologically marked Soviet spatial heritage is valued in Estonia.

The article is divided into the following five parts: (1) an overview of the materials, methods, and conceptual framework used in our research and analysis; (2) results of the research, including an introduction to Sillamäe and the wider Ida-Virumaa region; (3) results of the research; (4) discussion of the results, featuring local stakeholders; and (5) conclusion.

2. Materials, Methods, and Conceptual Framework

This research was partially conducted in the framework of the EU HORIZON 2020 project Social and Innovative Platform On Cultural Tourism and its Potential Towards Deepening Europeanisation (SPOT). Analyses of policy documents on the local, regional, and national levels as well as field research including tourism surveys and interviews with stakeholders in the tourism sector were conducted as part of this project and inform our research.

In autumn 2020, Tallinn University conducted a survey among the inhabitants, visitors, and tourism entrepreneurs in Ida-Virumaa to map the current situation of cultural tourism in the region, followed by a round of stakeholder interviews in autumn 2021. Interviews were also conducted with the representatives of the regional Ida-Viru Tourism Cluster and Estonian Tourism Board. In total, 14 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in September and December 2021. For this article, five interviews are the most relevant. One in-depth interview with a representative of Sillamäe Museum and a local independent tourism entrepreneur were carried out at Sillamäe Museum. Four interviews were conducted online, with the following stakeholders: (1) the Town Government's Information and Marketing Specialist (in office 2018–2021), (2) a representative of the Ida-Viru Tourism Cluster, and (3) two representatives of Visit Estonia, the national tourism board at Enterprise Estonia.

In addition, participant observation fieldwork was carried out in Sillamäe in October 2020 and in February, June, July, and August 2021 (in total, over two months in the field), during which numerous unofficial conversations were held with the town's inhabitants and tourism stakeholders from the region. S.M. visited the town and its museum several times, participated in the Sillamäe Town Days celebrations in 2021, participated in the Heritage Conservation Area Working Group's meetings online, and attended the in-person consultation about the heritage conservation area with Sillamäe residents on 21 October 2021. During fieldwork, the heritagescape approach was applied as a method and conceptual

framework to analyse “how a site uses the components of its tangible landscape to create a distinct place of the past” by following three simple guidelines: boundaries, cohesion, and visibility [23]. A tourist destination is always framed by a specific, tourist gaze [24] and it is easy for the visitor to get stuck in the vicious cycle of circulating references, reproducing the same image that drew them to the place all over again [25]. The visitor’s expectations, experiences, and relationships are influenced by specific behavioural patterns and cultural (re)presentation, even when they acknowledge and document their status as a guest [26]. Rather than assessing whether the site offers a “real”, “good”, or “bad” version of the past, the heritagescape approach allows one to notice challenges, assess the latent potential, and envision alternatives.

During fieldwork, the town museum emerged as a significant case study that embodies the possibilities, challenges, and conflicts of Sillamäe as a heritage and tourism destination. The museum is envisioned as a future “cultural, visitor, leisure and informal education centre that commits to the collection, preservation, research, exhibition and popularisation of the culture and history of the area” in the Sillamäe Town Development Plan 2022–2026 [27]. However, museums are never neutral. They are sites of memory that always tell only a part of the story, biased towards the preferences of the curator and the perception of the viewer, as they work “with the perceived and transformative power of objects that have been extracted from their original environment and re-inscribed into a symbolic landscape” [28].

3. Research Context: Ida-Virumaa

This chapter is divided into three sub-categories. Firstly, an introduction to the Ida-Viru County provides the broader context for the case study. Secondly, complexities surrounding Sillamäe are explained, tracing its extraordinarily fast development and special status back to natural resources. Thirdly, the contemporary idea of tourism as an economic diversifier in Ida-Virumaa is challenged through examples of its effect on the development of identity elsewhere, paving way for the application of the heritagescape method to reveal alternatives to the authorised discourse.

3.1. General—Ida-Virumaa

Sillamäe is the third largest town in Ida-Virumaa, the north-easternmost of Estonia’s 15 counties. It is a region that covers 2972 km² and is situated on four terrain types: the coastal plain of the Gulf of Finland, the Viru limestone plateau, the Alutaguse lowland, and the coastal plain of Lake Peipus. Located in the periphery of the European Union and bordering Russia, it is home to approximately 138,000 people living in 7 towns, 12 smaller urban settlements, and 175 villages [16].

A defining feature of the region is its oil shale industry. The “brown gold”, which is still mined in Ida-Virumaa today, has a long history in Estonia with the first written reports of oil shale findings dating back to 1777. The rise of the region’s international reputation both as an industrial hub and seaside destination began with the establishment of the Baltic Railway (Baltisk (Paldiski) Tallinn—St. Petersburg railway line), completed in 1870. While the Russian Empire had little interest in the industrial exploitation of the novel source of energy, the railway links served the strategic interests of the Imperial fleet and economic interests of the Baltic German landholders and grain traders [29]. Passenger services were not the priority, but the railway connection to larger cities played its role in the Baltic seaside becoming a popular tourism destination among Russians—for example, before World War I, the leisure resort Narva-Jõesuu had 10,000–14,000 visitors per year [30]. Visits by foreigners continued in the early 20th century and even between the world wars, despite political obstacles [29].

The first oil shale factories were established in 1916 to help Russia survive the post-war fuel crisis by providing alternatives to coal [1]. During the first independent Republic of Estonia (1918–1940), local energy production became a matter of honour: although it was

established with the support of foreign investors, it was the first industry that the country could call its own. Systematic research into oil shale and its products ensued.

During World War II, shale oil was used by the occupying Germans until Estonia fell under the Soviet occupation. During the Soviet era, the share of heavy industry in Estonia increased considerably and when shale gas became the main energy source in St. Petersburg and towns in Northern Estonia, the demand for oil shale increased as well. Soviet Union's heightened attention to the energy sector and high centralisation resulted in pre-planned monofunctional settlements that had fundamentally different relations to their wider surroundings than the organically growing urban settlements in capitalist societies based on private interests [31]. The post-war boost of the oil shale industry affected the construction, development, and appearance of settlements restored in Ida-Virumaa after World War II: war-torn villages were clustered into industrial towns and new buildings were constructed to accommodate planned mass industry and associated workforce transferred to Ida-Virumaa from other Soviet states. This led to an 'urban anomaly' [3] in comparison with the rest of Estonia, where similar changes were happening on a much smaller scale.

Tourism was not an immediate priority after the war, so the "industrialisation" of tourism only started in the early 1960s [29]. Under Soviet rule, summer culture was reorganised along with other aspects of life. In the tourism sector, a sharp distinction was made between tourism and recreation. This was manifested in infrastructure: pioneer camps and sanatoriums accessible with special permits were built in seaside resorts and hiking trails were established for independent holidaymakers in sparsely populated rural areas [29]. The Baltic coast remained a popular destination for Soviet citizens, attracting people with its lengthy coastline, natural beauty, calm of the hinterland, cultural heritage of medieval towns, and reasonable vicinity to industrial centres, placing third in popularity after the Crimea and the Caucasian coasts [29].

3.2. Sillamäe Exceptionalism

While also defined by industry and Soviet history, Sillamäe followed a slightly different trajectory to the rest of the region and therefore occupies a somewhat exceptional position in Ida-Virumaa today. The town's uniqueness results from its location at the Baltic Sea and the geological composition of its ground and the Soviet interest in nuclear power, which is manifested in a well-preserved example of Soviet urban planning.

Sillamäe was first mentioned as a tavern called Tor Bruggen in 1502, along with the nearby Tüksamäe, now a part of Sillamäe, in 1520. In the 17th century, Sillamäe and Kannuka were fishing villages. Tüksamäe enjoyed a slightly higher reputation: in addition to fishermen's homes and facilities, it also hosted a manor (Tüseli manor). In the late 19th century, Sillamäe and Kannuka became small resort villages among others, treasured for their tranquillity, refreshing sea waters, and the smell of pine trees. In 1928, to the dismay of holidaymakers, industrialisation arrived in the area in the form of an oil shale distillation plant established in Tüksamäe by the Estonian Oil Consortium belonging to Swedish capital [32]. Oil shale was imported from the nearby Viivikonna mine and, from 1935, most of the oil produced was exported to Germany via Tallinn [33].

In World War II, the region, including Sillamäe, was heavily damaged. Almost the whole settlement, including the distillation plant was destroyed. The war in Europe ended in May 1945, but already during the 1944–1945 winter, a group of geologists from Moscow were sent to the area to research the possibilities of producing uranium from the black dictyonema shale. The first tests were conducted in Narva and, initially, the administrative centre of the production was intended to be set up there, but in 1947, importance was shifted to the objects in Sillamäe [3]. On 6 August 1946, the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs issued a decree to establish a uranium mine and metallurgy factory on the site of the former oil shale distillation plant [32]. The uranium factory began its work in late 1948 [32].

The planning of the Sillamäe factory influenced the development of the whole region [3]. International importance of nuclear technology during the Cold War gave sites of nuclear production and the accompanying settlements a special status not only locally, but in the all-

union context. Similar importance has been observed in relation to 1950s “plutonium cities” in the USA [33,34]. Nuclear urbanism, or “urbanism without an outside” [31], was a specific mode of planning, which embedded nuclear sites into a “Cold War planetary infrastructural totality” characterised, firstly, by high risks and responsibility that accompanied such production; secondly, by institutional and normative isomorphism that was the result of a controlled distribution of workforce and strategic technologies; thirdly, by the exclave socio-spatial condition compensated to the dwellers through comfort and resulting in a specific kind of belonging and identity; and finally, the impossibility of full de-industrialisation due to high standards for dismantling nuclear facilities and but also their waste management requirements [31].

While Türsamäe on the western bank of the Sõtke river formed the industrial part of Sillamäe, Kannuka on the eastern bank formed its residential area. The residential area was planned according to an all-Union standardised project designed from 1946–1947 at Lengiproshaht, the Leningrad division of the State Design Institute of the USSR Ministry for Coal Mining [35]. The planning of the nuclear town included a large reorganisation of the local population, replacing native Estonians with highly skilled Russian-speaking newcomers, who, with their lack of Estonian language skills would pose no threat to the Soviet regime locally. Due to the high priority of the factory, the town was built relatively quickly and exceptionally completely, before the architectural principles changed in the mid-1950s [35]. In September 1950, the population of Sillamäe exceeded 10,000 [3]. By that time, Sillamäe had become a unique town in Estonia, featuring “70 two- and three-storey residential buildings, 280 one-storey residential buildings, a hospital complex of 12 buildings, several crèches and kindergartens, a high school, House of Culture, two cinemas, office building for the Executive Committee, several shops and canteens, and other objects” [3]. Due to secrecy, instead of the settlement’s name, different code names, such as “paint factory”, Combine No. 7, Factory No. 7, Enterprise P.O.B. 22, Enterprise P-6685, or simply Plant No. 1 were used to refer to it [32]. The use of the dictyonema shale was discontinued from 1 July 1952 due to it being less efficient compared to richer ores imported from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and elsewhere [32]. Even though this decreased the importance and secrecy of the town, the ongoing construction works continued and Sillamäe was better supplied than other towns [33,35].

In the early 1950s, four- and five-storey apartment buildings were added to the area by the sea to accommodate the quickly growing population of the intensively developing settlement [35]. Sillamäe was officially declared a town in 1957, with a comprehensive list of facilities that a Soviet town should have: “a town committee, police department, marriage registration office, a specialised court, prosecutor’s office, special department of the KGB, military fire control unit, medical sanitary care department, sanitary epidemiological station, pharmacy, a House of Culture with 400 seats, a cinema with 600 seats, high school for up to 300 pupils, adult high school for up to 300 pupils, college for up to 300 students, the party’s district committee, Komsomol’s district committee, children’s club, a stadium, sporting pavilion, dance ground, park, sauna, mechanised laundry, photo studio, sewing workshop, a retail chain that completely satisfies the inhabitant’s needs, bread factory, hairdresser, post office, radio broadcasting unit, savings fund, juridical consultation, kolkhoz market, and a television centre to retransmit TV from Leningrad currently under construction” [3].

Uranium production was again reorganised in 1977, when plants were also established in Czechoslovakia and Hungary and the transport of radioactive raw materials across Europe ceased to be necessary; a new production complex was added to the factory in Sillamäe and production concentrated on pre-processed uranium ore [33]. In addition, a rare metals factory and a rare-earth metals factory were established in 1970 [33]. In December 1989, all uranium-related activities in Sillamäe ceased due to political changes that eventually led to the end of the Soviet system [36]. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, privileges permitted by Moscow also disappeared. Plant No. 7 was privatised and nowadays, the town continues to host a metallurgical factory, a rare metals factory, and a rare-earth metals factory. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the town was officially

opened to visitors but has been losing inhabitants ever since: the population of Sillamäe has decreased from 20,280 people in 1989 to 12,386 in 2021 [37]. The legacy of the population reorganisation lives on; about 97% of the town's inhabitants today are Russian-speaking.

The uranium-related activities, and the later metal processing in Sillamäe left behind a specific kind of legacy: a one kilometre long and half a kilometre wide tailings pond on the slippery clay soil, at the edge of the Baltic Sea, separated from it only by a dam. The side products and leftovers of chemicals used in these activities have been pumped into a waste depository; some of the waste contains radioactive metals [33]. The tailings pond itself is not unique—there were other similar cases in Eastern Europe, Germany, Sweden, and USA—but its vicinity to the sea was [33]. Deemed unstable and posing a risk to the sea due to erosion processes that were damaging the dam [38], the tailings pond was remediated between 1999 and October 2008. This meant stabilising the dam with reinforced concrete stakes jammed into the clayey soil, collecting radioactive soil from the surrounding area and adding it to the waste in the depository, modelling the shape of the waste pile with oil shale ash, isolating the pile with weatherproof covering, including a final layer of soil that would protect the pile from freezing and would facilitate the growth of grass that was sown on the hill (the roots of bushes or trees could ruin the layer that protects the construction against water) [33]. The cover is supposed to last one thousand years. During the remediation works, an industrial harbour was built at the far end of the tailings pond and opened for international navigation in 2005.

The remediation was a joint project between Estonia, Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, and later Norway), Germany, the USA, and the European Commission; total cost was 312 million Estonian kroons or 20 million Euros financed by the European Commission, NEFCO, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Estonia [33]. At the end of the remediation project, a memorial stone was placed on top of it (Figure 1).



Figure 1. “Sillamäe jäätmeoidla saneerimine 1999–2008” (Rehabilitation of Sillamäe waste depository 1999–2008). Memorial stone to the remediation of the Sillamäe tailings pond. Photograph: Saara Mildeberg, 2 July 2021.

3.3. Changes and Development

Oil shale extraction in Estonia peaked in the 1980s and decreased in the 1990s due to post-Soviet restructuring of the industry. Depletion of mines and the economic changes related to the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in a sharp decrease in production. People migrated from Ida-Virumaa, leaving entire districts empty and shrinking towns such as Kukruse, Viivikonna, and Sirgala into villages.

To encourage the positive development of Ida-Virumaa and promote the region's industrial heritage, the Estonian Regional Development Strategy for 2014–2020 suggests utilising the “[...] remaining resources of mining and industry, and abandoned mining areas and industrial buildings in tourism and other functions [...] through recreational and cultural services and local marketing” [39]. Although the Regional Development Policy for 2021–2024 [40] does not address tourism again, the idea of tourism in the region is ever present. As described earlier, Ida-Virumaa coastlines and its summer resorts were already popular among the Russian elites in the 19th century, and in the Soviet period, sanatoriums built in resort towns, such as Narva-Jõesuu were made available to visitors with special permits [29].

To take advantage of the tourism potential of Ida-Virumaa's peculiar scenery, improve the region's image and develop local tourism, a unified marketing campaign was launched in 2017 by the Ida-Viru Tourism Cluster, a tourism development and marketing group run by the Ida-Viru Enterprise Centre. The campaign published online (<https://idaviru.ee/>, accessed on 30 August 2022) introduces Ida-Virumaa as an adventure land: a concept that includes seaside spas, history museums in mining towns, water and winter sports centres in and around repurposed mines, and the sparsely populated swamp and forest landscapes that are attractive to independent hikers.

Tourism can encourage local entrepreneurship and promote ideas of sustainability and cultural exchange; however, as a field that heavily relies on exoticism and traditions, it can also damage local identities. Desire for primitive and exotic “others” in the imaginary geographies of great nations has now also turned to self-exoticism, reproducing hierarchies of cultures and nations within, while also claiming their agency and sovereignty [41]. Tourism can motivate remembrance activities through social and material encounters in areas characterised by difficult heritage, such as in the case of the international gathering of military vehicles at the former military base Borne Sulinowo, Poland [42], but can also have a problematic influence on the development of local identity. Local identity begins to depend on tourism when tourism providers select elements of nature and history to promote and assign values no longer based on personal experiences but rather on universally learned and universally understood narratives based on stereotypes and illusions about the area and its past. Socio-economic dependency on tourism can lead to the emergence of new, commercially motivated communities, such as in the case of Setomaa, Estonia [43], and the emergence of “tourism landscapes”: material realities that cater to visitors but exclude local interests, or unsuccessful tourism landscapes, as described in the case study of Paldiski, Estonia [26]. In extreme cases, such as that of the Sápmi land touristification, the landscape ends up being stripped of all meanings related to its past and future, endangering Indigenous lands [44]. Complex memory and identity politics in Sillamäe and Ida-Virumaa more broadly mean that here, too, tourism development must be approached with nuance, taking into consideration how it will impact local identity.

The Planned Sillamäe Heritage Conservation Area will focus on the nucleus of the town: the first set of residential buildings built in the 1940–1950s, with two public buildings built in the same style have already been declared as cultural monuments in 2001: the House of Culture and the Cinema Rodino (Figure 2). Since institutional researchers, experts, and tourism professionals often provide an external interpretation to local characteristics thereby creating and circulating idealised and exoticised stories [26], then there is a danger that the heritage conservation area will impose a particular, external image onto Sillamäe. Examining the town as a broader heritagescape enables an exploration of its potential before the contents and the borders of the heritage conservation area are set.



Figure 2. Proposed borders (green line marks the conservation area and blue line marks the protected zone), buildings (red, orange, and yellow designate different categories of protection), and cultural monuments (dark blue) of the Sillamäe Heritage Conservation Area. Estonian Heritage Conservation Board, 2022.

4. Results

This section is divided into two sub-categories. First, the roles of heritage and tourism are examined in the Town's Development Agenda, revealing the importance of the museum for the town's official tourism development plans. Secondly, the heritagescape approach is applied to the town centre, looking at and beyond the planned heritage conservation area and documenting the current state of affairs in the museum as a multifunctional memory institution.

4.1. The Town's Development Plan

According to paragraph 37, section 1 of the Local Government Organisation Act, each municipal district—town or parish—in Estonia is required to have its own development plan and budget strategy to better integrate and coordinate the development of different spheres of life, including long-term trends, needs, current problems and opportunities in (at least) economic, social, cultural, and natural environments, and the health of the population [45]. These development plans set the strategic goals and their expected impact for the period of their effectiveness.

The Sillamäe Town Development Plan 2022–2026 [27] is the guiding document for Sillamäe for the coming years. According to a SWOT analysis, the main goals of the town are to increase coherence with other regions in Estonia, while also internationalising its economy. In addition to increasing the number of people with Estonian citizenship and Estonian language skills, improvement and diversification of the quality of services to improve the reputation of the town as a tourism destination and the development of the necessary infrastructure, are seen as some of the key activities required to increase Sillamäe's chances of cooperation and competition in the region (p. 31, [27]). Next to

more locally oriented necessities, such as improving living and learning environments and water and canalisation infrastructure, solving traffic problems, and ensuring environmental sustainability and availability of public services and social security for the townspeople, international attraction plays a great role in Sillamäe's vision for 2030. Related goals are to become the logistical centre for both freight transport and tourism flows in Ida-Virumaa, develop an internationally attractive business environment, and become a well-known tourist destination in the Baltic Sea region, where the town's architectural heritage combined with new buildings ensures the high quality of the urban environment and encapsulates the town's identity (p. 32, [27]). Tourism is included in the first section on developing employment and entrepreneurship, and in the second, on culture. In the category of employment and entrepreneurship, tourism is a potential that can be realised through seaside and harbour development, and existing attractions in town. Tourism development would diversify entrepreneurship in the town, and help develop the service sector and infrastructure, which would also benefit local inhabitants (pp. 36–37, [27]). In the category of culture, tourists are seen as consumers of the town's cultural objects and events (p. 55, [27]).

The employment and entrepreneurship section prioritises the seaside area and emphasises the need to develop experience, leisure, sports, and urban and cultural tourism, including exhibiting Soviet history and offering "the milieu, products and activities characteristic to the era" (pp. 36–37, [27]). The overall appearance of the town centre, its buildings, and the urban seaside with its promenade are prioritised. Areas that are deemed to require renovation are the central square with its House of Culture and town hall, and the memorial sign on the square opposite of the town hall. Entrances to the town should be decorated with sculptures. Particular attention is given to Sillamäe Museum (renovation and fitting out its surroundings) and its special exhibition ('temaatiline näitus') in the House of Culture, as the museum is argued to have the potential to function as "cultural, visitor, leisure and informal education centre that commits to the collection, preservation, research, exhibition and popularisation of the culture and history of the area, using new technologies, and would grant access to all visitors through developing a modern support infrastructure, thereby also supporting the development of tourism." (p. 37, [27]).

The culture section emphasises the already existing infrastructure of cultural activities. Among others, attention is drawn to activities, development, and modernisation of the Sillamäe Museum, Sillamäe House of Culture, Sillamäe Library, hobby schools, and youth centres. A proposal is made to develop a theme park based on the exhibition of Sillamäe Museum to "preserve and exhibit the town's culture" (p. 56, [27]); this theme park has already confirmed funding to be received by 2022. In addition, new items should be acquired to the museum's collection and both the exhibition on the Soviet period and the museum's activities should be expanded. The activities of the thematic museum on the House of Culture should be broadened. The "development of tourism routes (street signs, opportunities to use the Internet, information boards, parking and leisure areas, observation decks, town decorations (incl. graffiti), historical objects into tourism products—restoration of sculptures on Mere puiestee and the town park, creation of other works of art and small architectural objects, and emphasising of the sea theme" are listed as a concrete action plan. In addition to the town square, the seaside, and the museum with its surroundings, the area around river Sõtke, and public green spaces are emphasised in this section as important aspects that add to the milieu of the town (pp. 55–58, [27]).

The notion of heritage ("pärand") is mentioned in the section on international cooperation, where Soviet heritage along with its architecture and military industry is listed as a unique characteristic of the town (p. 67, [27]). The main target groups for industrial and tourism cooperation are Kotka and the Hamina region in Southern Finland, across the Gulf of Finland (p. 67, [27]). On this note, a ferry line already opened between Sillamäe and Kotka in 2006, but it was discontinued in 2007 due to economic reasons.

4.2. Sillamäe as a Heritagescape

The formation of a heritagescape is guided by three principles: boundaries, cohesion, and visibility [23]. In Sillamäe, two physical boundaries immediately delimit the research field: the geological break lines that have influenced the development of the town, namely the river Sõtke and the Baltic Clint. The river Sõtke in the east is an obvious boundary between the residential and the industrial part of the town; however, this boundary is challenged by another guiding principle: visibility. The newly established seaside promenade in the residential part of the town offers a clear view of the factory's two operational chimneys and a serene hill covering the tailings pond and stretching far into the Baltic Sea (Figure 3). However, the remediated waste depository is not the first thing a visitor notices. From west to east, another boundary, the Baltic Clint splits the town in two: the upper town and the lower town by the sea. Entering the town from the direction of Narva or Tallinn, the visitor has no other option than to approach the town from its cliff-top side where the highway runs; currently, the port of the town is not open for passenger traffic.



Figure 3. View from the promenade (opened in late 2020) to the western, industrial side of Sillamäe across Sõtke river. Industry on the left, waste depository in the middle, harbour on the right. Photograph: Saara Mildeberg, 9 August 2021.

In terms of its coherency, Sillamäe consists almost entirely of buildings from the Soviet era. However, one can distinguish three main architectural styles associated with different Soviet periods. Stalin-era neoclassical buildings from the late 1940s and 1950s form a nucleus, which is surrounded by five-storey silicate brick “khrushchyovkas”, named after the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, and lastly, mostly in the eastern part of the town, large, five- to nine-storey red brick residential buildings were built during the Brezhnev era from the 1970s–1980s (Figure 4). Buildings from the 1940s–1950s have received the most attention and can be considered a unique heart of the heritagescape, forming its own boundary and

excluding other architectural styles. Those buildings are also characterised by cohesion, which the National Heritage Board of Estonia wishes to emphasise by declaring the area a heritage conservation site. The most ambitious plans of Stalinist urban planning in Estonia (Viru Square, Tallinn Cultural Centre, and Central Square of the Pärnu region) were never finished in their time [8]. Today, only Sillamäe and Kohtla-Järve have town centres built after the canonical planning principles of Stalinist architecture. Although currently there are single buildings under protection in both towns, their value and meaning as heritage objects largely depends on the recognition ensembles that surround them.



Figure 4. Brezhnev-era red brick buildings in the eastern side of the town. Photograph: Saara Mildeberg, 9 August 2021.

Continuing the journey along Kesk Street towards the old town centre, a visitor would notice a town hall building with a sharp spire. According to town guides, the town hall was built to look like a Lutheran church to convey an image of Sillamäe as just another Estonian town to anyone approaching from the sea. Across the town hall is a park with one of the few sculptures in town. Renaldo Veeber's "Man and Space", also known as "Peaceful Atom", depicts a promethean man carrying an atom and stands in the exact location where a statue of Stalin used to stand between 1951–1963. "Man and Space" was unveiled on 5 November 1987, to celebrate the town's 30th anniversary. Considering that the uranium-related activities that rendered the town a secret were still ongoing, the reference to atoms was bold. The sculpture is also exhibited in the museum as a small scale model, but there he reaches out his hands with a slate in a reference to the site-specific resource that laid the foundation to the industrial town. In the northeast corner of the park, our visitor encounters one of the first public buildings in the town: Sillamäe House (or Palace) of Culture. The establishment, built in the Stalinist neoclassical style, is still functioning as the local cultural hub and also hosts the special exhibition of the Sillamäe Museum.

The buildings in Stalinist neoclassical style create a historic milieu without reference to the hardships and terror associated with the Soviet regime; therefore, it is not possible to regard them as dark heritage [46]. Dark heritage has its place in the region, but not in

Sillamäe. The local museum could be the place where such narratives are discussed, but museums in the Ida-Virumaa region are thematised and segregated based on their focus. Sillamäe represents the history of the forbidden paradise; the manor in Kukruse is dedicated to the polar researcher, Baltic German Eduard von Toll and his family; Vaivara Museum of the Blue Hills covers the atrocities of the defence battles in 1944; Narva Museum introduces history until the independence of Estonia in 1918, with a special focus on the Swedish time; Kohtla-Nõmme Mining Museum specialises in the region's oil shale industry, providing visitors access to the underground mine; and the Oil Shale Museum in Kohtla-Nõmme showcases equipment, history, and thematic art.

The Sillamäe Museum was established by two local artists in 1995 based on the collections of the oil shale chemical factory. From 1995–2003, the museum with its exhibition hall was run by the House of Culture. Since 2004, the Sillamäe Museum has been run as an independent institution and since 2014, it has been housed in a separate building. The museum works closely together with the town government of Sillamäe, receiving regular funding from the town budget, and the strategic goals of the museum match with what the town expects it to become, prioritising four directions: “mediation and popularisation of cultural heritage”, “development of tourism service and improvement of service quality”, “collection, preservation and attractive display of the history of the area”, “development of museum pedagogy” [47].

The museum's exhibitions are located in two buildings: the main exhibition is in the lower part of the town in a two-storey former kindergarten building at Kajaka 17a, while the Soviet-themed exhibition is in the upper part of town in the basement of the still functioning House of Culture at Kesk 24. The two exhibitions have two different stories to tell about the town. Both geographically and architecturally, the location of the Soviet exhibition gives it an advantage compared to the rest of the museum downtown. The House of Culture that houses the Soviet exhibition was designed by Aleksandr Popov in 1946–1947 and built in 1947–1950. It has been recognised as an architectural monument and the basement of the building, a former bomb shelter, is where the exhibition dedicated to the town's Soviet period is located. The exhibition is divided into four rooms. Two rooms focus on the building itself: the first room examines the history and architecture of the House of Culture and the second displays the bomb shelter's ventilation system along with equipment such as uniforms and gas masks.

The third room is a walk-through room and is the most text-intensive part of the exhibition, hosting a pyramid of the Collected Works by Lenin and the biographical book “Meie noorusaastad” (*The Years of Our Youth*) or “Как молодые мы были...” (*How young we were*), compiled of materials from the museum's archive, town library, the archives of the local newspaper “Sillamäe Vestnik”, and information found online. The book, published in 2015, is written by and dedicated to the builders of the factory and the town and includes a list of the names of the first people that settled in the industrial town. Although this introduction is written in Estonian, there is only one article, “Sillamäe sünnilugu” (*Birth Story of Sillamäe*) by Vaino Kallas in Estonian, the rest of the materials are “in their original language”, i.e., Russian. The biography of Sillamäe in Kallas' article begins in winter 1944–1945, when geologists from Moscow arrived to examine the local graptolitic argillite for uranium oxides, and ends with a mention that the town was a “closed town” from 1947 until 1991. According to the museum representative, the closed-ness tends to be overemphasised, as the town was next to the main road between Tallinn and St. Petersburg. The main reason why people wanted to come to Sillamäe, was because it was better supplied with goods, and it is said that various tricks, such as leaving the car and walking the last few kilometres to town to sneak through the checkpoints, were used to get in.

Two busts of Lenin guard the entrance to the fourth room, where an oil painting of Stalin in front of a freshly ploughed field with transmission towers immediately catches the visitor's eye. This room is mostly object-based but since the music of the TV show shown on loop in the upper corner of the room fills the whole shelter, it sets the mood for the whole exhibition. Some of the items have explanatory signs in Estonian and Russian

next to them, but non-Estonian or non-Russian speakers are left completely clueless. This part of the exhibition is especially coherent in its use of known Soviet symbols, but without explanations, the visitor is in danger of getting lost in the colourful bric-a-brac.

Looking down from the park next to the House of Culture, the visitor is met with a breath-taking view of the sea. A cascade of stairs leads down from the park to the boulevard, Mere puiestee, literally, “the Sea Boulevard” (Figure 5), that continues between decorated residential buildings almost until the sea, to what used to be hinterland at the western border of the Soviet Union, but is now the newly established promenade. The “pearl of Sillamäe” (as referred to by the Information and Marketing Specialist, among others) makes use of the Baltic cliff that cuts the town into two levels. Thanks to the neoclassical architectural style, pale yellow colour, and worn-off look of the residential buildings, one feels like they have remained in the past when walking through the old town after a visit to the Soviet exhibition. The steps were originally decorated with plaster statues and palm trees, uncommon in the northern climate of Estonia. Considered part of the attempt to embody an image of communist paradise on earth [35], these statues are among the ones that are to be restored according to the Development Plan [27].



Figure 5. The view from the top of the stairs through the boulevard to the sea. The location is sometimes used as a pop-up concert venue, here during the Town Days for the concert of singer Anne Veski. Photograph: Saara Mildeberg, 29 June 2021.

Still surrounded by Stalinist buildings, the visitor has to turn left from the boulevard to make their way to the main building of the Sillamäe Museum at Kajaka 17a. Inside this part of the museum, the curators have tried their best to give an overview of the whole recorded history of Sillamäe, that is, from the 19th century until the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the town lost its special status as a nuclear town. The two floors of the building are divided into several exhibition halls that, together with collections not on display, crowd all the rooms of the former kindergarden. The recently deceased treasurer of the museum Alexandr Popolitov’s stone and mineral collection fills one of the larger rooms in the right

wing on the ground floor, but also leaves space for a tiny and cramped exhibition of various household items of the pre-industrial era. The left wing introduces the international and industrial history of Sillamäe: from the annual visitors of the Russian intelligentsia to the resort town in the late 19th century, to the beginning of the industrial era in the late 1920s, to the new settlers who arrived in and after the late 1940s and their privileged life in the secret nuclear town. Another, smaller room on the ground floor features a reconstruction of a Stalin-era domestic interior. When discussing the museum's collections that are not on display, the representative of the museum explained that the museum also has a collection of paintings of Sillamäe as a resort from its pre-industrial era, when tourists would visit the South Coast of the Gulf of Finland for its refreshing water and the pleasant smell of pine trees.

The rooms on the first floor are reserved for an exhibition of musical instruments, temporary exhibitions and local art initiatives. Again, although there are textual objects here and there, there are very few written clues that connect the images and objects and it is difficult to navigate in the exhibition without a guide. However, this is not a conscious choice, but a misfortune of time and financial resources, as the representative explained. Providing the exhibition with titles and explanations is in process, but lack of staff, especially Estonian-speaking staff, is hindering it considerably.

5. Discussion

This section is informed by the heritagescape approach and includes the opinions formed by the local tourism stakeholders based on their experiences. The previous sections illustrate that creating a coherent tourism image of Sillamäe is and has been a struggle of identities and different historical narratives. To compare with the town's official development plan and fieldwork location, a local tourism entrepreneur and representatives of the Sillamäe Museum and Town Government were asked about the tourism challenges in Sillamäe. Additional comments were gathered from the representatives of the regional Tourism Cluster and Visit Estonia, the national tourism board. Three key narratives for Sillamäe's tourist identity emerge: the uncomplicated history of a resort town, the best-preserved example of Soviet urban planning, and a mysterious industrial hub. However, each narrative has its issues for tourism development.

Searching for a marketing strategy, it is important to stand out but also to fit in an attractive and preconceived niche. The town's promotional logo was recently updated to match the town's motto "Sillamäe—the town of fresh sea winds" (*Sillamäe—värskete meretuulte linn*) on the commission of the Town's Information and Marketing Specialist. The logo from 2017 featured the industrial area's two chimneys and a seagull and the new one from 2020 includes stylised symbols depicting the town hall, House of Culture, harbour at the end of the promenade, boats, and green areas of the town. In addition, both wavy lines above and underneath the panorama and the alternating colours of the composition are conceptualised as symbols of the positive aspects of a clean and welcoming resort town.

The resort image pursued in the logo and town's motto is however challenged by the seasonality aspect. The local independent tour guide and tourism entrepreneur arrived to the area at the turn of the century and, at first, lived in a nearby farm they had received back through privatisation. They began working in tourism in 1998, at first as a guide in Europe for various tour operators. Then they started receiving guests at their own farm. In 2001–2002, they started spending more time in Sillamäe and bought their first apartment in around 2010. They now own three apartments in town which are rented out through Airbnb and Booking.com. In an interview in Sillamäe on 14 September 2021, they reflect on the journey: "Finally, I understood that it is very difficult to invest in a thing that works for three months and doesn't work for nine months. There is no point in making big expenses. Luckily, I wasn't granted a loan and luckily, I didn't receive any financial aid, so I couldn't do anything more. Otherwise I would have to pay the loan back now and it would be very . . . [...] This is why I went over to [renting out] apartments, at least they are [working] throughout the year". With their experience, they propose a national scheme where investments into regions outside of the

main towns—Tallinn, Tartu, and Pärnu—could be tax-free for five years, until the business is truly established.

Focus on the Soviet era could help Sillamäe become an all-year tourism destination, both for domestic and international visitors. Both the local museum representative and the independent entrepreneur agree on this, although their view differs slightly when discussing what exactly makes the town attractive: is it just the buildings, or the people as well? The museum representative argued that ‘Russian culture’ gives visitors a feeling of being in ‘another Estonia’ and is the main attraction in Sillamäe. This ‘Russian culture’, that to them is synonymous with ‘Soviet culture’, consists of Soviet-era architecture and the segment of population that arrived in the town after WWII. The independent entrepreneur did not fully agree since for them ‘Soviet culture’ consists exclusively of tangible objects: that ‘what was made during the Soviet era’. They offered a parallel with the unimaginable event of singing Soviet songs and waving red flags, while the architecture that was built then still remains and is allegedly gaining value in the eyes of the local people over time.

A point of view presented by the Tourism Board representative in an interview on 2 December 2021 illustrates that there has not only been a shift in the authorised heritage discourse, but also in what the visitors are after. They provide a list of advantages Ida-Virumaa has due to its peculiar history and Soviet heritage.

Ida-Virumaa can:

- (1) Cater to the tourists that seek adventures and like-a-local approaches;
- (2) Provide young tourists with the interesting and exciting experience of the Soviet era and its legacy that they have heard about but never experienced themselves;
- (3) Provide the opportunity to experience ‘Russian culture’ in the safety of the European Union;
- (4) Help bridge the generational gap in understanding between those who lived in the Soviet Union and their offspring.

Heritage is a collective identity manifested in physical objects and accepting heritage sites as landscapes locates them in a fluid, changing space with which people regularly interact, and not just as part of an evolving storyline or developing ideologies [23]. Officially acknowledged heritage status may bring attention to the town but it alone does not guarantee investments and development. The representative of the museum expresses hope that a Heritage Conservation Area could help to reach the critical mass of attention needed for investments and action. The independent entrepreneur is convinced that the younger generation has more enthusiasm to invest in the town and repair the buildings according to the requirements of the Heritage Conservation rules. One of the obstacles in their eyes is the existence of housing associations, where everyone living in the same building has to agree on the repairs.

Currently, there are two buildings under heritage protection in Sillamäe, both since 2001: the House of Culture (Kesk 24) and the former Cinema Rodina (Kesk 11). While the House of Culture has been renovated and is currently being used as a cultural centre hosting various events, the building of the former cinema has been privatised, is out of use, and has no clear future plans. According to the local tourism entrepreneur, it is easier for the owner to pay the fine for neglecting the building than to renovate it. His proposed solution is to set a deadline for the renovations; if the owner fails to meet the deadline, the building should be forcefully sold. Both the independent entrepreneur and the representative of the museum propose a variety of functions for the building that lacks tourism infrastructure, such as accommodation or catering venues due to the special status of the town during its foundation and for decades that followed: a cultural centre, youth centre, event venue, restaurant, etc. Only one hotel exists in the town and some opportunities exist via the Airbnb portal, but nothing for groups of tourists.

The seaside promenade, opened in late 2020, is seen as a potential event location in the future, if or when a passenger terminal is opened at the port of Sillamäe, which currently only functions as an industrial harbour. The independent entrepreneur and the representatives of the Town Government and the town Museum all express interest in creating tours to the industrial area for visitors. Although the privately owned Port of

Sillamäe (AS Sillamäe Sadam) supports local cultural life, it is currently not interested in receiving commercial tourists nor discussing the current state of tourism activities in the port. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the area is used by several international companies. In other towns in Ida-Virumaa, the wounds and scars of broken supply and demand connections are still visible as (semi-)abandoned industrial complexes—which are simply too large to host contemporary production and are looking for re-purposing and/or investors—while Sillamäe as a port town with a successfully re-oriented industry is a notable exception. Although its social function has also changed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the port occasionally organises tours for its partners and prospective employees and anyone in the town can visit once a year in late June or early July during the Sillamäe Town Days.

On the potential of Sillamäe as an industrial tourist destination, the local independent entrepreneur comments: *“I think the thing is still too raw or too fresh here.”* While operational industries are not suitable for or willing to participate in tourism, post-industrial spaces require external funding to be suited for visitors. The former Kreenholm textile factory complex in Narva and the Mining Museum in Kohtla-Nõmme are examples of former industrial spaces that combine architecture and history and draw international attention as elements in global networks of similar objects. In an interview on 15 December 2021, the representative of the Ida-Viru Tourism Cluster also remains sceptical about industrial tourism, but for different reasons, as in the Ida-Viru context, industry *“bears the fossil [fuel] footprint of the oil shale industry”*. Although oil shale is also used in the chemical industry, they do not think this explanation would be sufficient for the younger generation that is critically minded about fossil fuels. However, they are relatively optimistic about providing offers based on education on the use of oil shale for business tourism.

From the three potential narratives for Sillamäe’s tourist identity, the uncomplicated history of a resort town and the best-preserved example of Soviet urban planning are the most widely prompted. The narrative of an industrial town with nuclear legacy remains in sight, but unexplored.

6. Conclusions

The town of Sillamäe in Northeast Estonia has in recent years received attention as the first area where Soviet architecture would be under protection in Estonia. This offers both opportunities and challenges for the local tourism development. Stakeholders on all levels agree that the critical mass of dwellers and entrepreneurs must be backed up on a national level to increase investments in the town. The emerging Heritage Conservation Area is welcomed by the local representatives, as they are already accustomed to relying on the image of a Soviet town. It may, on the one hand, provide the attention needed to overcome marginalisation, attract investments, and challenge the seasonality of tourism in the region. On the other hand, it can force the town into a loop of circular referencing that denies attention to the town as a whole. Sillamäe as a nuclear urbanism site and industrial hub remains underexplored, but even whole Soviet heritage is visible and emphasised in the town and its museum; the lack of explanations leaves its meaning ambiguous and open to interpretations. The heritagescape as a theory and method offers the visitors of Sillamäe a chance to experience a curated version of the Soviet era and contemplate on the legacy of nuclear industry, while remaining in the safety of a resort town. This kind of analysis in the urban planning could provide important insights on how a visitor experiences the place and use this information to better mitigate knowledge exchange between different groups of people.

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