

“MIESTO LABORATORIJA“ (CITY LAB)

CASE STUDY SHORT SUMMARY REPORT

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Case Study at a Glance

The “Miesto Laboratorija” (City Lab) project was initiated to address the lack of community spaces in Antakalnis district (Vilnius), transforming an underutilized building into a multifunctional hub. Created by a grassroots team, the initiative sought to foster community engagement and environmental sustainability. Key challenges included urban decay, social isolation, and bureaucratic barriers, which were addressed through participatory solutions.

The project encouraged civic involvement through hands-on activities such as furniture repair, gardening, and cultural events. Residents were drawn in through direct invitations, interactive workshops, and social gatherings, fostering a sense of ownership over the space. Efforts to engage different demographics saw success with young families and seniors, though engaging teenagers remained a challenge.

Despite limited municipal involvement in its early stages, “Miesto Laboratorija” demonstrated the impact of grassroots initiatives on urban resilience. The municipality later recognized its value and explored ways to support similar community-driven efforts. However, financial sustainability remains a key concern, with the need for long-term funding and policy integration.

Key lessons highlight the importance of adaptable engagement strategies, inclusive urban planning, and collaboration between grassroots movements and governance. The model can be applied to other cities, emphasizing the role of citizen-led initiatives in shaping urban development. Future efforts should focus on institutional partnerships and sustainable funding strategies.

This report was prepared by the team of Kaunas University of Technology (KTU) within the UPRUN project. The team of KTU is responsible for the content and the accuracy of the statements presented in this report.

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Case Study Profile

Topic

- ☐ Community Gardening & Urban Agriculture
- ☒ Community Hubs & Cultural Activities
- ☐ Urban Design & Planning Processes
- ☐ Public Space Development & Management
- ☐ Local Economic Development
- ☐ Urban Regeneration & Rehabilitation

Scale

- ☐ Metropolitan / city region
- ☒ City scale
- ☐ Neighbourhood scale
- ☐ Block scale
- ☐ Building scale

Resilience Challenge

- ☒ Environmental and ecological resilience
- ☒ social & cultural resilience
- ☐ Infrastructure and technological resilience
- ☐ Economic & livelihood resilience

Duration

- ☐ Immediate (less than 1 month)
- ☐ Project-Based (1–12 months)
- ☐ Programme-Based (1–3 years)
- ☐ Strategic (3–5 years)
- ☒ Structural / Transformative (more than 5 years)

Stakeholders

- ☒ Community members
- ☐ Local government
- ☒ Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)
- ☐ Private sector
- ☐ Academic and research institutions

Type of Civic Engagement Supporting Neighborhood Resilience

- ☒ Resident-led and grassroots initiatives
- ☒ Collaborative planning projects or processes
- ☐ Advocacy and capacity building
- ☒ Volunteer and community service projects
- ☐ Short-term, more flexible project-based engagement
- ☐ Long-term, more institutionalized engagement (development of stable structures, etc.)
- ☐ Protest and resistance mobilization
- ☐ Art-and culture-based civic Engagement

Level of Civic Participation

- ☐ Information
- ☒ Involvement or participation
- ☒ Collaboration or co-creation
- ☒ Empowerment
- ☐ Resistance and protest-based empowerment

Empirical Basis and Methodological Approach

The “Miesto Laboratorija” (City Lab) project was initiated to address the lack of community spaces in Antakalnis district (Vilnius), transforming an underutilized building into a multifunctional hub. Created by a grassroots team, the initiative sought to foster community engagement and environmental sustainability. Key challenges included urban decay, social isolation, and bureaucratic barriers, which were addressed through participatory solutions.

The project encouraged civic involvement through hands-on activities such as furniture repair, gardening, and cultural events. Residents were drawn in through direct invitations, interactive workshops, and social gatherings, fostering a sense of ownership over the space. Efforts to engage different demographics saw success with young families and seniors, though engaging teenagers remained a challenge.

As part of the case study, we conducted a total of three interviews:

- **One interview with an initiator.** The project was initiated as a response to the lack of community spaces in Antakalnis. One of the main reasons was the desire to create a place where people could meet and act together. The initial project team consisted of 5 members who sought to combine community mobilization with environmental aspects. The initiative arose naturally – the organizers knew the area well and knew what solutions it lacked.
- **One interview with a governmental body.** This project was not planned or implemented by Vilnius Municipality but rather a private initiative facilitated through a lease agreement with a private owner. The municipality was not formally approached during the project's inception, and its involvement has been minimal.
- **One interview with a beneficiary.** This section outlines the background and involvement of V.R. in the Miesto laboratorija initiative. Respondent V.R. is an active community member who follows the activities of the “Miesto laboratorija” on social networks and participates in various events of the organization.

Compendious summary

INTRODUCTION

“Miesto Laboratorija” project was initiated in response to the lack of community spaces in Antakalnis. The primary goal was to create a dedicated place where residents could gather, interact, and engage in joint activities (*1 pic.*). The founding team, consisting of five members, was motivated by the need to integrate community-building efforts with environmental sustainability. The initiative was not the result of formal research but rather the organizers’ first-hand understanding of the area’s needs, gained through their personal experience and engagement with the neighborhood.

Neighborhood challenge

“Miesto Laboratorija” project was initiated in response to several pressing challenges in the Antakalnis neighborhood. These challenges were primarily related to the lack of public spaces, deteriorating infrastructure, and limited community engagement. While the project was not directly designed as a governmental initiative, it emerged from a grassroots understanding of the area’s social and environmental needs.

Key Challenges Identified:

1. Lack of Community Spaces
2. Urban Decay and Limited Infrastructure
3. Environmental Concerns
4. Weak Community Engagement and Social Isolation
5. Bureaucratic and Financial Constraints

Miesto laboratorija also faced obstacles during the project’s design and implementation. The setbacks and obstacles included limited long-term financial planning, a lack of structured collaboration with the municipality in the early stages, and ongoing uncertainty about legal restrictions related to the use of private property.

Through local engagement and adaptive solutions, Miesto Laboratorija successfully addressed many of these issues, creating a stronger, more connected community. The most important signs of success were the involvement of local residents, visible physical improvements to the area, and the creation of informal support networks through regular gatherings. However, long-term sustainability remains a concern, requiring continued support from both the municipality and local stakeholders.

RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGE

To address the lack of public spaces, the organizers repurposed a privately owned, underused building. This solution provided a semi-public space that was accessible to the community. Recognizing **the lack of public gathering areas**, Miesto laboratorija transformed this underutilized building into a multifunctional community hub. This space was designed to be accessible and welcoming, allowing residents to organize events, share ideas, and build social ties. The project promoted the concept that the space belonged to everyone, encouraging a sense of ownership among community members.

To **overcome low community engagement**, the project implemented interactive and practical involvement methods, including:

- Physical activities like furniture repair, gardening, and public space beautification, which proved more effective than purely theoretical events.
- Social gatherings such as collective cooking sessions and workshops to encourage interpersonal connections.
- Community-driven initiatives such as the “Green Shop” (a plant-sharing station) project, fostering a shared responsibility for neighborhood improvement.

To **address the urban decay and environmental issues**, Miesto Laboratorija introduced several interventions:

- Cleaning and repurposing neglected areas, such as converting a garbage-filled lot into a functional garden and children’s play area (e.g., the “mud kitchen” for free play).
- Encouraging sustainable urban practices, including composting, eco-friendly gardening, and urban farming.
- Organizing regular events to ensure long-term improvements.

Understanding that some demographic groups were harder to engage, the project tailored its approach:

- Young families with children were naturally drawn to activities like gardening and play spaces.
- Seniors were engaged through initiatives like coffee gatherings and board game meetups, helping reduce social isolation.
- Teenagers remained the most challenging group to involve, highlighting the need for targeted youth-oriented activities in the future. Engaging teenagers proved particularly challenging due to the lack of age-specific activities and limited initial outreach strategies tailored to their interests.

MECHANISMS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Civic engagement was a fundamental aspect of the Miesto Laboratorija project, ensuring that the community played an active role in shaping their neighborhood. The project adopted inclusive, participatory, and hands-on approaches to encourage residents to contribute meaningfully. These mechanisms ranged from informal social interactions to structured activities that promoted long-term involvement.

Key Mechanisms of Civic Engagement:

1. Personal Invitations and Direct Communication
2. Practical and Hands-On Activities
3. Social and Cultural Events
4. Creating a Shared Sense of Ownership
5. Inclusive Engagement Strategies
6. Online and Offline Communication
7. Encouraging Long-Term Commitment

“Miesto Laboratorija” project successfully employed multiple mechanisms of civic engagement, ensuring active and diverse participation. The combination of direct outreach, practical involvement, and social activities fostered a strong sense of community ownership. While engagement efforts were largely successful, some challenges—such as involving teenagers—highlight the need for adaptive and evolving engagement strategies in the future.

CASE STUDY FINDINGS AND LESSONS LEARNED

“Miesto Laboratorija” project serves as a model for grassroots community engagement, addressing key challenges related to public space revitalization, social cohesion, and sustainable urban development. Through a bottom-up approach, the project successfully mobilized residents, created a multifunctional community hub, and established mechanisms for long-term civic participation.

This case study highlights the power of community-driven urban initiatives. While the project successfully addressed neighborhood challenges and strengthened civic engagement, sustainability remains a key concern. The findings suggest that long-term collaboration between grassroots organizations and municipal authorities is essential for ensuring that such initiatives continue to thrive. As the project website states, one of the most important reasons for the emergence of the “Miesto Laboratorija” is the desire to unite and activate the Antakalnis community. Since the founders of the project live in the same area, communication with local people, the Antakalnis residents, whom the organizers identify as the project’s greatest asset and inspiration, took place consistently and naturally. The entire community not only helped create this place, but has also been actively contributing to the development of various events and projects to this day. According to the founders, they aimed for the “Miesto Laboratorija” to become an open space for people’s initiatives from the very beginning, from events to lectures.

CONCLUSION

The Miesto Laboratorija project serves as a successful example of a community-led initiative that transformed a neglected urban space into a vibrant community hub. Through grassroots engagement, hands-on participation, and adaptive solutions, the project fostered stronger social connections, enhanced neighborhood resilience, and promoted sustainable urban development. While challenges such as financial sustainability, the project has demonstrated that resident-driven efforts can create significant, lasting impacts on local communities.

Key Findings:

Community-led development has proven to be an effective approach. Social engagement played a critical role in strengthening neighborhood resilience. Direct interactions, such as personal invitations and informal gatherings, were far more effective than digital outreach. Different demographic groups participated in varying ways, with young families and seniors more actively involved than teenagers. Revitalizing physical spaces was a major driver of community participation. Transforming neglected areas into well-maintained social hubs encouraged interaction and strengthened local identity. Flexible, multi-use spaces enabled diverse activities, from informal gatherings to structured workshops. Financial sustainability remains a key challenge. Although the project secured a long-term lease, funding for ongoing operations and maintenance is uncertain. Initial municipal support was limited, highlighting a need for stronger ties between civic initiatives and local governance.

Recommendations for Future Projects:

A diverse funding strategy is essential to ensure sustainability. Long-term partnerships with businesses, NGOs, and government grants could provide financial stability. Social enterprise models, such as community-run cafés and workshops, could help generate revenue while maintaining community engagement. Inclusive engagement strategies should be prioritized to reach different demographic groups, particularly young people. A combination of digital outreach and in-person interactions can

ensure broader community involvement. Community spaces should be designed to be multi-functional and accessible to all age groups and social backgrounds. Adaptability is crucial for creating spaces that can support various social, cultural, and environmental activities.

Applicability in Other Cities:

The Miesto Laboratorija model can be successfully applied to other urban settings, particularly in neighborhoods that lack public gathering spaces, have limited municipal support for grassroots initiatives, or seek to reclaim and repurpose underutilized spaces. This approach is well-suited for cities with strong civic engagement cultures, especially in areas undergoing urban regeneration. It can also work where residents are motivated to find alternative solutions to social and environmental challenges. Municipalities that are open to supporting community-led initiatives through funding, policy changes, and infrastructure provisions will benefit the most from similar projects.

If there were an interest in replicating such a project, one might begin with informal conversations among neighbors to identify shared needs and adapt even a temporary space for gatherings. It would be helpful to organize inclusive, hands-on activities, form a small core team with defined roles, document early successes, and prioritize trust and flexibility over formal structures in the initial phases. Miesto laboratorija brand and methodology are also available for replication in other cities through a licensing arrangement, enabling the creation of similar community-driven hubs across Lithuania. This project provides the opportunity to use its name and operational concept through a formal agreement.

Long-Term Vision:

Institutional integration is key for ensuring that community-led initiatives become a recognized part of urban planning. Establishing permanent partnerships between grassroots organizations and municipal decision-makers can help create policies that protect and support citizen-driven urban development. Scaling and expansion should be considered by replicating the Miesto Laboratorija model in other districts or cities facing similar urban challenges. Building a network of community spaces that share best practices and resources can help strengthen the impact of similar initiatives. Ongoing community engagement should be encouraged through educational programs, leadership training, and participatory governance structures to maintain momentum and ensure lasting success.

Part 1. INTERVIEW WITH AN INITIATOR

1. Introduction and Motivation

The project was initiated as a response to the lack of community spaces in Antakalnis. One of the main reasons was the desire to create a place where people could meet and act together. The initial project team consisted of 5 members who sought to combine community mobilization with environmental aspects. The initiative arose naturally – the organizers knew the area well and knew what solutions it lacked.

2. Project Design and Approach

The project was developed with close involvement of the community and with the aim of creating a common space. Before starting the official activities, the organizers carried out various activities: inviting the community to participate in social events, cooking together, participating in the renovation of the premises and donating necessary items. This helped to create a strong local identity and involve residents in the jointly created environment.

3. Participation and Actions

One of the main means of community involvement was a personal invitation to participate and practical activities, such as furniture repair or joint work in the field. It was observed that residents were most likely to engage in physical, tangible activities, while it was more difficult to engage in theoretical or cultural events. The main group of project participants was young families with children, while involving teenagers and seniors was more difficult.

4. Challenges and Support

The biggest challenge was financing - in the initial stage it was difficult to obtain funds for basic needs, such as plumbing equipment or renovation of premises. However, important support was received from the municipality, which provided premises on symbolic terms, thus ensuring the continuity of the project. The help from the contribution of businesses and volunteers was also important.

5. Results and Reflections

The project significantly changed the dynamics of the local community. New social ties emerged, residents became more actively involved in local activities, and some people even chose to purchase housing in this area due to the strong community atmosphere. It was observed that the habits of residents also changed over time - they became more inclined to communicate, join common activities.

6. Lessons Learned and Future Directions

The main lessons learned are the importance of trust, the need for consistent community involvement, and flexibility in planning activities. The project has shown that community change occurs through practical participation and long-term commitment. In the future, the organizers plan to expand the activities, promote greater civic engagement, and seek new ways of collaborating with the municipality and business partners.

7. Impact and Long-Term Vision

In the long term, the project aims to become a model for other communities that would like to create their own spaces. One of the main goals is to create a system in which community initiatives are

supported and sustainable. It is also planned to strengthen the aspect of social responsibility and promote long-term community participation.

Part 2. INTERVIEW WITH A GOVERNMENTAL BODY

1. Introduction and Role

The City Lab is a community initiative managed by VšĮ "Citizens' Initiatives." It is not a project planned or implemented by Vilnius Municipality but rather a private initiative facilitated through a lease agreement with a private owner. The municipality was not formally approached during the project's inception, and its involvement has been minimal. The City Lab operates within a privately owned building, part of the larger Sapiegu Tech Park, and serves as a hub for community-driven activities, fostering social engagement and urban sustainability.

2. Spatial Challenges

While Vilnius Municipality was not directly involved in the project, it has broader concerns related to neighborhood spatial planning. Common challenges include a lack of public amenities, deteriorating infrastructure, and limited community spaces. However, the City Lab has introduced innovative solutions, encouraging resource-sharing and sustainable living. The municipality recognizes that such initiatives contribute to neighborhood resilience by addressing spatial and social needs from a grassroots perspective.

3. Policy and Governance Framework

Vilnius City Municipality is not directly responsible for the City Lab project, as this initiative is owned by the NGO Civic Initiatives. Although the municipality is not always directly involved in civic initiatives, it has shown interest in cooperation and support for communities by organising meetings, seminars and other initiatives. Public participation and community involvement in urban development takes place in several phases, such as design and urban planning, but they are regulated by different municipal departments and laws.

4. Collaborative Efforts and Challenges

The collaboration between the Vilnius City Municipality and the community involves efforts to foster public participation in urban development. However, this partnership also faces several challenges due to differing priorities, technical constraints, and regulatory frameworks. Collaborative efforts relating with these aspects: the municipality seeks to engage with the community by organizing meetings, creative workshops, and discussions to encourage citizen participation in urban planning; initiatives such as community strengthening and empowerment competitions provide funding for community-led projects, including cultural events, urban gardens, and social initiatives; support is available for the renovation of historic buildings, covering 70-80% of restoration costs for heritage sites, including wooden architecture; the City Lab serves as an example of an independent community initiative that aligns with municipal goals of fostering public engagement, despite not being directly initiated by the municipality. The main challenges relate to the lack of initial participation (the municipality did not initiate the City Lab project and was not immediately aware of its development, which indicates a communication gap between community-driven efforts and municipal planning), legal and technical constraints (public participation in urban projects varies considerably between the different stages of the planning process (spatial planning and design) and the type of ownership (public and private)), the requirements of the Department of Cultural Heritage regarding the protection of buildings and the use

of land, and restrictions on private ownership (many initiatives, including the City Lab, operate in privately owned buildings, which means that the municipality has limited influence on their use and sustainability). Despite these challenges, the municipality continues to explore ways to strengthen its collaboration with communities, ensuring their active role in shaping the city's development while navigating regulatory and logistical barriers.

5. Barriers and Solutions

Barriers and solutions to problems related to safeguard restrictions, regulation, conflicts of public and private interests, etc. Urban development projects face constraints related to heritage protection (KPD requirements), functional zoning requirements, municipal management, which may limit flexibility in changing the use of buildings or modifying urban spaces. Many community initiatives operate in private buildings, making it difficult for the municipality to directly support or manage them. In addition, commercial interests can sometimes override community priorities.

6. Support, Funding, and Resource Allocation

The municipality actively promotes community participation and empowerment by organising meetings, workshops and discussions to strengthen public participation in the urban development process. Community centres and spaces, such as the City Lab, are hubs for a wide range of activities that support sustainable community building efforts. The municipality promotes cultural heritage conservation and social initiatives, recognising the role of communities in maintaining historical and environmental sustainability.

The municipality organises annual funding competitions in which public institutions, associations and non-governmental organisations can apply for financial support for various community-initiated projects. Grants for the renovation of historic buildings - financial support covering 70-80% of the renovation costs is available for the preservation of cultural heritage sites, including wooden buildings. Municipal funds can be used to support public events, urban gardening projects and sustainability initiatives to foster a stronger sense of community. Resources for community initiatives are allocated on the basis of the viability of the project, social impact and relevance to the municipality's objectives.

7. Impact and Long-Term Vision

The municipality's efforts to organise meetings, seminars and funding competitions have led to greater public participation in the urban development process. This has given communities the opportunity to play an active role in shaping their neighbourhoods. Initiatives such as the City Lab and similar projects have inspired the creation of more community centres, for example in Šnipiškės and Pavilniai, providing residents with dedicated spaces for social and cultural activities. Funding for the renovation of historic buildings has helped to protect wooden architecture and other heritage sites, reinforcing the role of the community as a guardian of cultural heritage.

The development of public participation aims to further involve citizens in decision-making processes, ensuring that their voice shapes future urban projects from the earliest planning stages. Inspired by successful projects, the municipality envisages the creation of additional community centres to foster local participation and social cohesion. Sustainable urban development - future initiatives aim to incorporate green spaces, energy-efficient solutions and environmentally friendly solutions.

Part 3. INTERVIEW WITH A BENEFICIARY

1. Introduction and Involvement

This section outlines the background and involvement of V.R. in the Miesto laboratorija initiative. Respondent V.R. is an active community member who follows the activities of the “Miesto laboratorija” on social networks and participates in various events of the organization. Regarding her first contact with the project, V.R. learned about the initiative through her friend Agnè, who told her about the activities in person. The first stage of involvement in V.R.’s case took place through personal contacts and social networks, and the initial support for the project was both material and organizational. Although she was not yet active in territorial planning processes, she expressed her desire to implement future initiatives. This shows that personal connections and dissemination of information in the community are important factors in getting involved in such initiatives.

2. Participation

V.R.'s participation in the project was active, but more focused on community initiatives than on formal planning processes. She expressed a desire to contribute to the activities and herself suggested initiatives, such as the plant shelf “Green Shop”, which allows sharing unnecessary plants. Also, at the beginning of the case, the respondent contributed not only by participating in the activities, but also materially - by donating furniture and items to the project (2 *pic.*). Her husband also contributed with IT support, showing the family's involvement in the initiative.

3. Understanding Resilience and Participation

V.R. associates resilience with community unity and maintaining social ties. She emphasizes that conflictual problem-solving is not effective – she prefers to act through social contact and community mobilization. One example is her initiative to organize a house lighting ceremony, which brings neighbors closer together and promotes a positive atmosphere in the community. In addition, V.R. sees the importance of a jointly fostered environment, which promotes community spirit and responsibility. She herself actively contributes to the beautification of the territory, organizing initiatives such as planting a crocus lawn, thus inviting the community to act together. This action not only beautifies the environment, but also strengthens neighborly ties, encourages participation and long-term engagement. She emphasizes that places such as the “Miesto laboratorija” are extremely important because they encourage resident involvement, reduce social isolation and strengthen community resilience.

4. Perceived Benefits and Changes

One of the most striking changes that V.R. highlights is the renovation of physical spaces and their new functionality. She gives a specific example – a mud kitchen (free play space), which has become an attractive place for parents with small children. Even when the “Miesto laboratorija” is closed, people come here to spend time, and the organized helpers help keep the area tidy (3 *pic.*). Before the project, this place was abandoned, full of garbage, but now a garden and flower bed have been installed here. The respondent emphasizes that this is a fundamental change – not only has the aesthetics improved, but also a place of attraction for the community has been created. In addition to the changes in the physical environment, V.R. also emphasizes the strengthening of relationships within the community. She states that now people already know where they can meet their neighbors, and there is an opportunity to simply drop by the space to chat or even work. She emphasizes that previously there was a lack of such spaces in the area, but now their emergence has helped create a stronger community.

5. Experience with the Process, Challenges and Concerns

V.R. states that getting involved in the project was not difficult for her. She emphasizes that the project organizers Agnė and Goda are open, friendly and accepting of everyone, so participation was natural and informal. Warm communication and community were important factors that helped her feel included and encouraged to participate. She also notes that there was no discrimination or exclusion in the project, which allowed people to get involved regardless of their experience or social status. When asked if she encountered any difficulties while participating, V.R. replied that she did not experience any direct obstacles. However, she identifies a broader challenge – the survival and sustainability of social businesses. In her opinion, projects such as “Miesto laboratorija” have difficulty surviving financially, because they compete with commercial businesses. Social businesses need more help from the municipality, for example, certain tax breaks or financial support, so that they can survive and benefit the community. She emphasizes that the “Miesto laboratorija” has become an integral part of the Antakalnis community, and its loss would be a major blow to the community.

6. Long-Term Impact, Future Participation and Recommendations

V.R. clearly states that the “Miesto laboratorija” has become an integral part of the Antakalnis community (4 *pic.*). She emphasizes that residents have already become accustomed to this space and actively use it, for example, seniors gather there to drink coffee and play board games. This shows that the project has not only created new spaces, but also helped to establish stronger social ties between different community groups. V.R. also states that the “Miesto laboratorija” is an example of how public space can be successfully adapted to the needs of the community. When it comes to future activities, the respondent expresses a desire to become even more actively involved and implement her initiatives, such as a seniors’ garden with raised beds and a city chicken coop, which could have both ecological and social benefits for the community. V.R. provides several recommendations on how similar projects could be successfully implemented and maintained:

- Municipal support and tax breaks – she believes that social businesses need to receive greater support, as they provide more benefits to the community than they receive in financial reward.
- Adaptation of infrastructure to all groups of society – it is important to ensure that the space is accessible not only to young people, but also to seniors, families with children, and the disabled.
- Sustainable source of income – in order for the project to be sustainable, it is necessary to look for alternative sources of financing, such as support from long-term partners or foundations.
- Involving residents in decision-making – it is important that community members feel included and have the opportunity to contribute not only by participating in activities, but also by making strategic decisions regarding the development of the project.

ATTACHMENTS

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