

## Utzon in memoriam

### The perils of publicity

#### More sea: on the house in Porto Petro, Majorca, by Jørn Utzon

The following meditation on Can Lis was sent by Alberto Campo Baeza and is published as a follow-up to the obituary of Jørn Utzon published in our last issue, ed's.

On that now far and calm day of placid summer light, Jørn Utzon, the maestro, was seated silently attentive in his reed-seated chair, during the course of the work on his mythical house in Porto Petro, Majorca.

The maestro was within, without the sea and the sky of insulting beauty. The architect in the shade, the landscape in the light. The luminous landscape was framed by built shadows. Built and defined with the precision of the large window openings, sensibly square.

The interior space, higher than is habitual. What architects call double height. The openings with the height determined by the human figure. Lintel, jambs and threshold, were the four sides with which the frame was formed which glorified the impressive nature outside: nothing less than the entire ancient Mediterranean Sea. The spectator entranced by the supreme work of art.

But, the architect thought, still seated, that there was too much sky. That the sea of Majorca was insuperable. And he had abandoned those subtle mists of Copenhagen for that which there in front materialised with furiously radiant calm. And if he was there, it was because he loved this sea. More sea.

And he invented a simple mechanism. He shifted the stones funnelling outwards with the ancestral wisdom of an old Druid. He inclined the lintel to the precise line. Angling the jambs into the required position. And he maintained the magnetic

horizontality of the threshold. Outside a simple glass which we don't see, which disappears.

As a magician could know the secrets of controlling space, he knows, the maestro touched everything with his magic wand and, abracadabra!, the spell was cast: the light there was tensed. And there today there is more sea. More sea than sky. And an immense beauty. Utzon the maestro.

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#### Utzon's legacy

Your obituary for Jørn Utzon (*arq* 12.3+4, pp. 197–202) reminds me of the occasion when, on a bright morning in April 2001, I found myself in a small square in the village of S'Horta, Majorca, in trepidation of the arrival of my hero.

Of course, Utzon was a recluse, a hermit who never spoke to the press and had lived in isolation with his wife on Majorca since the debacle of the Sydney Opera House affair, so I was expecting a difficult and perhaps aloof meeting. With the tragic ending of the film 'Il Postino' that I had seen the day



The living room of Can Lis, Porto Petro, Majorca, Jørn Utzon

before still resonating in my mind, I even wondered if touching greatness might prove to be a jinx.

While I waited, a battered old white Rover saloon arrived and a tall, elderly man emerged. 'So you must be the English architect!' he said. Here was my hero, unrecognisable in his Ray Bans and certainly not the man I knew from those Cary Grant look-alike photographs taken in Sydney some 40 years previously. Reassuringly, he and his wife were instantly charming, talkative and full of good humour. We agreed to drive down to the coast to visit Can Lis.

So there I was with one of the great architects of the twentieth century, walking around his former home trying to understand why he seemed anxious for my approval. The house revealed itself incrementally with its five separate stone pavilions assembled around a cubic living room that created a glare-free hush upon entry that seemed to transport me to another world. We sat on the crescent-shaped seat and he told me how Majorca had always been a trading crossroad between Europe and the Orient, and of how the house looked towards Africa. I wondered if this was a hint of how he saw his own position in creating such a consummate Mediterranean building on the island. I quickly learnt that Utzon liked to tell stories in a very Hans Christian Andersen way, and that he found most things funny and was a devotee of Basil Fawlty of sitcom fame, whom he would imitate readily.

Over lunch, as Utzon told stories and laughed heartily at the vagaries of man and time, he took off his sunglasses and there he was, suddenly recognisable as my hero. I realised that I had been wrong, for here was no superman, just a man, albeit burdened with genius.

The next day I visited his home a few kilometres inland on a hillside – Can Feliz – where three pavilions had been marshalled neatly side by side, stepping down the slope and commanding wonderful views towards the coast. More domestic and much less rugged than its predecessor, with touches such as rugs, refined glazed timber doors and timber furniture that had not yet petrified into stone (the furniture at Can Lis had stayed static for long enough for Utzon to remake them more permanent in stone).

Over the week there were occasions when the pain of the Opera House affair suddenly surfaced, but only fleetingly and

nearly always qualified with 'this was all a long time ago'. Utzon never, not even when gently provoked, talked badly of anyone, even about the politicians who had conspired to unseat him, preferring to discuss the wonderful architects he had worked with – Mogens Prip-Buus, Oktay Nayman, Richard Lepastrier – or even more exotically, some of the architects he had met and admired – Aalto, Asplund, Corbusier, Kahn, Mies, Wright ...

Later, as he generously looked through some of my own work and recognised the determination of my struggle, he warned me not to 'let architecture kill you!' as he felt it had done to his friend Otto von Spreckelsen, whose Grande Arche in Paris met a similar fate to the Opera House and who suffered an early death at the age of 58.

The assumption that Utzon is a maverick and a dreamer who allows programme and budget to run amok has stuck, yet despite countless words that have been written on 'The Sydney Opera House Affair', the truth is still debated. It was clear that Utzon had left part of his soul in Sydney and when I offered to go back there with him, it was Lis who took me aside and said that it was just not possible as it would kill her husband, although whether she was talking about the long journey, or the emotion this would stir up, I was unsure.

Returning to Majorca the following year, armed with rolls of drawings I had made of the two houses (as well as many houses he had made sketch designs for in his early years that he eventually felt should not be included in the forthcoming monograph), Utzon was very excited to see his creations finally on paper. Both houses had been drawn merely to gain local authority approvals and the drawings lost, and their construction, based on a rigorous logic, was laid out on the ground by Utzon to grow like a natural formation.

Spending time with Utzon, it was clear that he was far from a dreamer. Preferring to see himself as a builder, he certainly had an incisive understanding of the practicalities of building and engineering – after all it was he who had the crucial insight that allowed the construction of the shells of the Opera House to be solved. He was enthralled by nature, and walking around the hillside near Can Feliz, we were constantly pausing as he found a branch, a leaf or a flower that

showed the wonder of nature's capacity to make things that fit place and climate. Although well informed of current architecture from across the world, he had little interest in new trends, singling out Glenn Murcutt as a 'very excellent architect' and expressing admiration for the new 'signature architects' in getting their clients to pay for their creations. His bookshelves were almost exclusively crammed with dog-eared books on the ancients, from Greece to Nubia, to Chinese and Mayan temples, that had so inspired him.

In time, Utzon's legacy will surely transcend the Opera House, as the Kingo and Fredensborg housing projects emerge as two of the most perfect examples of collective housing, the church at Bagsværd is rivalled only by Le Corbusier's Ronchamp, his modest house in Hellebæk is seen as the template for much Scandinavian Modernism and his Assembly building in Kuwait for a potential new Arabic architecture – not to mention his Silkeborg museum, one of the great unbuilt masterpieces of plastic form.

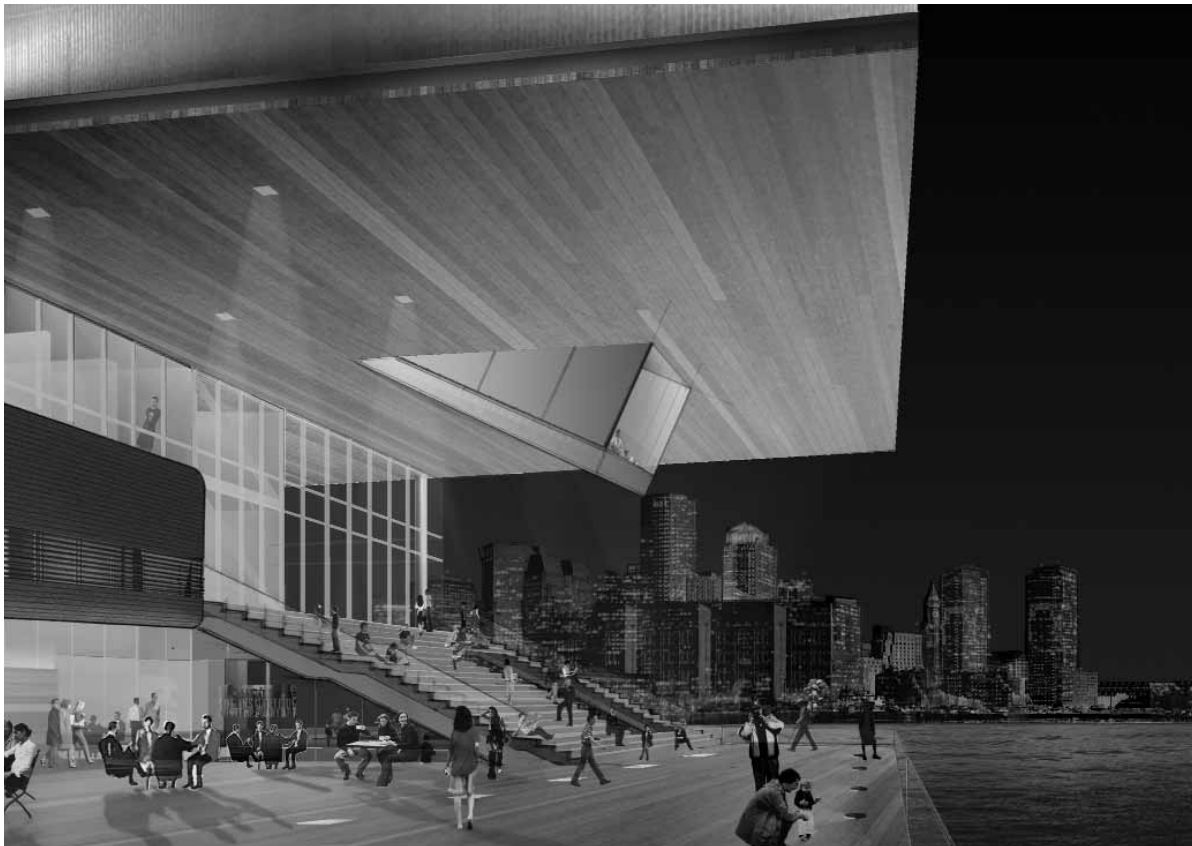
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### Translating a practice from drawing to building

In his recent paper on Diller + Scofidio (or more recently Diller Scofidio + Renfro, *arq* 12.3+4, pp. 232–48) Christopher Pierce manages to some degree to keep a critical distance from his subjects. However, I cannot help but feel that he is looking at the practice through the eyes of a fan, trying to overcome a certain disappointment in the unfulfilled promises of his heroes, searching for evidence that they might still deliver, seeking similarities between the practice's earlier drawings of unbuilt work and the photographs of their recent buildings taken by Iwan Baan.

The author charts the practice's development with regards to changes in personnel – the appointment of Renfro – and a change in photographer in the person of Baan. The former change is seen by the author as partly responsible for the firm's stronger pursuit of building projects, which he identifies in the paper as 'the plight of building'. The latter change is interpreted by Christopher Pierce as a rescuing act, in that Baan's photographs, in his view, reconnect the built work



The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Diller Scofidio + Renfro

with the qualities of the practice's earlier explorations.

Upon reading the paper two things immediately came to my mind. First, Marshall McLuhan's prophetic stipulation that 'The Medium is The Message', which seems to be at the heart of Diller + Scofidio's work and the relevance of which I will come on to below, and second, Philip Larkin's statement that:

*The Golden rule in any art is: keep in there punching. For the public is not so much endlessly gullible as endlessly hopeful: after twenty years, after forty years even, it still half expects your next book or film or play to reproduce that first fine careless rapture, however clearly you have demonstrated that whatever talent you once possessed has long since degenerated into repetition, platitude or frivolity.*

Larkin's thoughts reverberate when Diller + Scofidio's earlier unbuilt explorations, in which drawing and presentational issues had taken centre stage, is considered next to their more recent venture into building.

Until 2000, Diller + Scofidio's career relied largely on the dissemination of their work through the media, simply because there were no buildings to be visited (except the 1981 Plywood House). There seems to be, however,

an expectation from the practice itself to achieve the same kind of recognition for their buildings that they had gained for their unbuilt work. But, in my opinion, the buildings struggle to deliver the kind of quality that would elevate them above the mainstream and thus maintain the practice's self-declared status as outsiders and dissidents. Because of this, according to Pierce, they now rely on post-rationalised images of their built work. Diller + Scofidio's case is a peculiar one, but – to me – it nonetheless shares similarities with a number of other architects whose built work distinctly failed to deliver promises inherent in their earlier and more experimental artistic endeavours which helped them make their names: Daniel Libeskind, Bernard Tschumi and Peter Cook to name but a few.

If one accepts the originality and intellectual dimension accredited by Pierce to Diller + Scofidio in their earlier work, it would suggest that, as far as dissemination of ideas goes, one would be looking at a classic artist/audience relationship in which the audience consists of admiring students (and to some degree architects). In Diller + Scofidio's work it seems to me that the repercussions of their efforts were comparatively

inconsequential – students would perhaps copy the drawing style and borrow some ideas, but as far as built architecture goes there would have been little or no evidence of any application of their ideas and/or style. Their early work perhaps can be seen as residing in the realm of fine art rather than in the world of architecture. As Pierce rightly points out, Diller + Scofidio were in control then; their modus operandi was that of the artist rather than that of architect. An artist, by default, must assume that they have something to offer that the world is interested in and that will capture an audience's imagination. Architecture, particularly that of the built variety, does not necessarily require that premise of a work's author and this is where I consider the problem to lie. Diller + Scofidio, despite having had no proven track record in building, seem to have taken the artist's attitude into the realm of built architecture only to produce in the case of the Boston ICA and in the words of Philip Nobel 'a so-so building'.

In Diller + Scofidio's case, the problem is further exacerbated by the fact that the master/student relationship in their recent work has been turned on its head on two accounts. First, and again picked up by Christopher Pierce, the drawings



– particularly of the ICA – are disappointing. What we see are images that would have perhaps made the grade in the early days of computer renderings and Photoshop, but which in 2004 already looked out-of-date, lacking the freshness of the firm's earlier work. Second, and this I feel was absent from Christopher Pierce's text, despite his mild criticism of the ICA, the building in my opinion looks like OMA on a not-so-good day. Again this was picked up by Philip Nobel – meaning that they now seemingly use other architects' visual vocabulary, perhaps in the absence of a vocabulary of their own. In this context, the author's comment about Diller Scofidio + Renfro's 'residency in an intellectual/artistic space in-between that prioritises constructing, not resolving' which is, according to him, allowed by Baan's 'half-finished' photos, and which he employs in response to Diller's apparent remark that the practice are not Gehry and not Koolhaas but something in-between, seems to me a little far-fetched.

Christopher Pierce's argument for Scofidio's ongoing importance and innovative powers, and his being reincarnated in Baan, who is according to the author 'almost accidentally reinventing architectural photography', is a point I must say I completely missed and still fail to understand. This is, I fear, where the fan in the author takes over, excusing and accepting the media driven nature of Diller + Scofidio's overall output. While Christopher Pierce acknowledges that Diller + Scofidio missed out the middle bit – the building – I would suggest (after Marshall McLuhan) that the medium, be it drawing or photography, in the firm's work is clearly the message. The question is consequently begged: should they build 'buildings'? Would it be fair to say that Diller Scofidio + Renfro, as 'building' architects, should rather reside in the mainstream, until they have had the time and opportunity to fine tune the art of building in the same way they mastered the art of drawing at the beginning of their career? Or should they perhaps continue to occupy a more artistic realm, as demonstrated and rightly pointed out by the author, successfully in the Blur Building (despite his rather tenuous description of the building being 'more drawing-like than any of their drawings')?

There is also a danger (partly to be blamed on the architectural

press I suppose) in the incredible amount of coverage the ICA, for instance, has achieved (there are 29 entries on the Avery Index alone at my last count) in the way that this 'so-so' building becomes a positive precedent for other aspiring designers. Interestingly, by choosing to write this paper, Christopher Pierce – I assume knowingly – continues to play Diller Scofidio + Renfro's game, giving them yet more exposure and publicity (as, indeed, am I by responding to it and extending the debate!).

Christopher Pierce's paper, while making some valid observations on the disparity in Diller + Scofidio (and Renfro's) periods of built and unbuilt work, fails in his attempt to attribute to the firm's recent *oeuvre* more credit than it perhaps deserves. A larger question looming here, and one that the paper does not address, is why it should be assumed that artists or designers with no track record in the design of buildings should be assumed to deliver the same quality in buildings as they do in their art work – and why they should be awarded with prestigious commissions in the first place (when some issues are perhaps better dealt with in works of fine art rather than in buildings)? Contemporary architects with high international profiles and exposure – and 'conceptual' credibility – can perhaps be classed into two categories. Those who came through the ranks via the route of building, in the process being able to learn the craft and to test ideas, starting with small projects and gradually working on buildings increasing in size. For instance, Jean Nouvel and Herzog & De Meuron. And then there are those who went straight from the artist's studio or the academic office to signature commissions which are arguably too large to handle for firms with relatively little building experience. Outside these two categories, there are of course those, with little or no media exposure, producing built work of a quality which continually exceeds that of the stars. Building is, of course, a very complex activity and generally it takes more than being famous – and employing a photographer – to do it well.

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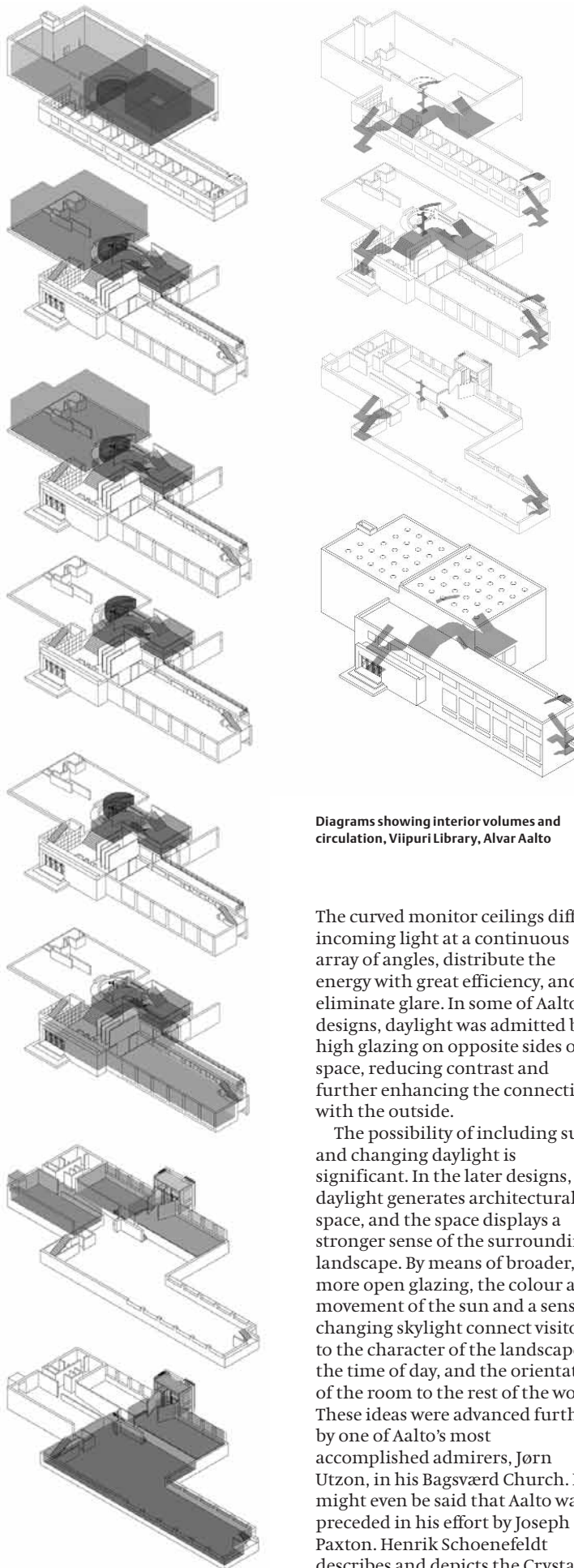
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### Light and landscape

Ulrike Passe's examination of Alvar Aalto's designs as integrated spatial and climatic events is very interesting (arq 12.3+4, pp. 295–311). As she notes, Aalto's efforts at this stage of his career were partially successful. Indeed, the ceiling of the Viipuri Library 'mimics the heat and light of the sun' but only in a generalised way. It may be useful to clarify Aalto's daylighting strategy, the role of technology, and interest in connecting his spaces to nature. For Aalto, Viipuri was not the end of the story.

Aalto probably omitted the windows in the Viipuri Library reading room to avoid glare from the direct sun or bright sky. At northern latitudes, the sun travels relatively low in the sky and often very close to the horizon. As a result, windows (vertical glazing at eye level) often admit direct sun. In contrast, skylights admit mostly diffused light (sun scattered by the earth's atmosphere) from the top of the sky where there is little direct sunlight. At Viipuri, direct sun is further constrained by the depth of the skylight and the size of the aperture and diffused by the skylight well (and by translucent glazing if the skylights included this type of glass). The design of the reading room cleverly recognises the special sky conditions of its location, at least in terms of daylighting for reading and work. But the skylights, as Professor Passe notes, are still mechanical devices, elements that perform one and only one task, over and over. They do not really influence the configuration of the space or make a vital connection to the world outside.

Whatever the ideal conditions for reading, sunlight is a critical component of the landscape and Aalto would certainly have wanted to incorporate it into his spaces. He achieved this later when he extended his 'free-flow open section' such that it became a device capable of capturing changing or bright skylight and, sometimes, direct sun at the top of the building. This can be seen in his later libraries from Seinäjoki to the project for Kokkola (and other buildings). These incorporate huge rooftop monitors with vertical glazing, so large that they are no longer just mechanical devices but part of the spatial development of the rooms themselves; visitors to the library inhabit the light-gathering devices. The monitors are capable of catching bright skylight and low-angle sun at locations well above the visitor's cone of vision.



Diagrams showing interior volumes and circulation, Viipuri Library, Alvar Aalto

The curved monitor ceilings diffuse incoming light at a continuous array of angles, distribute the energy with great efficiency, and eliminate glare. In some of Aalto's designs, daylight was admitted by high glazing on opposite sides of a space, reducing contrast and further enhancing the connection with the outside.

The possibility of including sun and changing daylight is significant. In the later designs, the daylight generates architectural space, and the space displays a stronger sense of the surrounding landscape. By means of broader, more open glazing, the colour and movement of the sun and a sense of changing skylight connect visitors to the character of the landscape, the time of day, and the orientation of the room to the rest of the world. These ideas were advanced further by one of Aalto's most accomplished admirers, Jørn Utzon, in his Bagsværd Church. It might even be said that Aalto was preceded in his effort by Joseph Paxton. Henrik Schoenefeldt describes and depicts the Crystal

Palace's stepped section and hovering first-floor galleries and how they were accompanied by ventilating, light-occluding, and light-filtering devices (arq 12.3+4, pp. 283-94). The Crystal Palace section certainly suggests a version of 'free-flow open space'.

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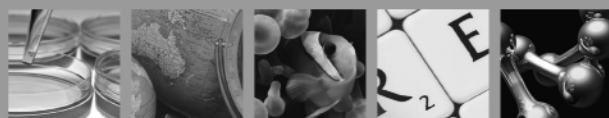
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