

## Historical Factors Influencing the Presentation of the Thai Pavilion at the World Expositions

Nussara Intaraboonsom<sup>1\*</sup> and William Chapman<sup>2</sup>

*\* Corresponding Author*

Faculty of Architecture, Silpakorn University, Thailand<sup>1\*</sup>

School of Architecture, University of Hawaii at Manoa, USA<sup>2</sup>

E-mail: nussara.int@hotmail.com

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### Abstract

This paper discusses part of the research done for my Ph.D. thesis at the Faculty of Architecture of Silpakorn University, titled Nation Brand Strategies: National Identity, Architecture, and Cultural Heritage Value: A Case Study of the Thai Pavilion at the World Expos.

The critical research questions the paper addresses is how historical factors influenced Thailand's presentation at the World Expos through its Thai Pavilion. The paper researches the changes in the Thai pavilions at the World Expos and investigates which branding strategies were used to present the national identity. One of the main findings is that since Thailand's first participation in 1862, roughly three periods can be identified where the main reasons for participation can be summarized as follows: fending off colonialism during colonial times, nationalism during the change-over to a constitutional monarchy, and nation branding in recent times. These periods align with the World Expo's general eras of industrialization, cultural exchange, and nation branding. The presentation changes somewhat over time, but overall, the national identity through the pavilion still holds on to traditional Thai architecture instead of more contemporary architecture. Previous successes at the World Expo are part of this; part of it is that a contemporary national architectural identity is challenging to define. For branding purposes, a need exists for authenticity and recognition. For these reasons, traditional architecture will likely continue to have a strong chance of reappearing at future World Expos, even if some elements are primarily symbolic. An important conclusion is that the successful presentation of traditional Thai

architecture has led to few changes despite significant changes in world events and national events.

**Keywords:** Sala Thai; World Exposition; Nation Branding; Architecture; Thai Pavilion

## Introduction

The study centers around how Thailand has presented itself to the World at the World Expo by using architecture over time. The question is relevant because for more than 150 years, unlike any other country, Thailand has held on to its traditional designs, often a Thai Pavilion, Sala Thai, or a replica of a temple. The research looks at historical reasons why the design has changed only slightly over so many years.

World Expos have been around since 1851. The first World Expo was held in London. It was also known as the Great Exhibition, or officially "The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations." (Digital Economy Promotion Agency (DEPA), 2022). The success of the First World Expo caused many fairs to be organized. To streamline them, the BIE, the Bureau International des Expositions, was created in 1928 and started its activity in 1931 (Bureau International des Expositions (BIE), n.d.). Thailand has been a member of the BIE since 1983. However, Thailand's history at World Expos dates back to 1862, when Thailand participated for the first time. In 1878, national pavilions, including the first Thai pavilion, were introduced at this Paris exposition (Smits & Jansen, 2012). Since then, Thailand has used Thai Salas, or replicas of Thai temples, to present itself to the world until very recently, when the representations became slightly more modern. A limited amount of research has been done about Thailand's national pavilions at the World Expositions, apart from the research articles written by Horayangkura (2017) and Jagoonchorn and Horayangkura (2022).

Key Research Question:

How did historical factors influence the presentation of the Thai Pavilion at the World Expos? The aim is to review the historical factors that have influenced the presentation of Thailand's identity at the World Expos through the use of the Sala Thai, or Thai Pavilion.

## Research Objectives

The main research objective, to study the historical factors, that have influenced the presentation of the Thai Pavilion as the identity of the national brand, was divided into two parts.

1.1 To review how historical events impact the Thai Pavilion design and the corresponding delivery of the national brand image. (for example: the economy, the change of the monarchy, technology, etc.).

1.2 To review the history of the Thai Pavilions at the World Expos.

## Literature Review

### Place identity

Each place has a brand, consisting of at least two elements: the brand identity, what the place is; and the brand image: what people think of it. Additionally, the communication between the place and its potential visitors is called branding. A strong brand requires a positive image and several unique identifiers.

Thailand has several strong brand elements. These include history, a separate language, territory that has not recently changed, traditional architecture, a unique dominant religion, beautiful landscapes, unique food, art, and folklore. Culture has always been a significant contributor since it is the most unique identifier. Some of these elements are presented at the World Expos, including architecture and other cultural artifacts, such as everyday artifacts showing the skills of Thai people, as well as religious and royal artifacts.

For most countries, the Expo is the single largest promotional event of a nation outside its borders (BIE, 2018). However, the target market for the pavilions is mostly the visitors from that country. The presentations and designs of the pavilions should always be considered, which matters since branding strategies are different for Thais and foreigners. Nevertheless, the brand must be accepted both abroad and domestically. So, it will have to target the right visitors but still fit within the overall national brand identity. (Mr. Chattan Kunjara Na Ayudhya, Deputy Governor at the Tourism Authority of Thailand, interviewed on December 26, 2022).

### History of World Expos

The first fairs or exhibitions were believed to have existed since the 12th century (Beier & Damböck, 2011)

The first World Expo was (in hindsight) considered in 1851. It was also known as the Great Exhibition, and officially it was called "The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations." (2022–b), Digital Economy Promotion Agency (DEPA). The character of the World Expo has changed a lot over the years. Before the world wars, the World Expos focused on industrialization (Digital Economy Promotion Agency (DEPA), 2022–b) and gigantism in architecture (López-César, 2019). The world wars caused people to link industrialization with negative consequences, and the themes of the World Expos involved cultural exchange and idea sharing. Around 1970, the focus shifted towards national branding and international problem-solving (Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB), 2011).

Digital Economy Promotion Agency (DEPA) (2022) describes three different eras as follows:

- Industrialization (1851 – 1930) showed technological and architectural advancements.
- Cultural exchange (1933 – 1968) promoted human progress and the exchange of diverse cultures.
- Nation branding (1970 – present) enhances the national image, raises awareness, and encourages sustainable development.

The periods can also be divided differently from an architectural perspective (López-César, 2019): The first period was defined by architectural gigantism (1851 until the beginning of the 20th century), and the second period had several economic crises and world wars (from the beginning of the 20th century till 1958). Afterward, there was a third-period featuring structural rebirth (1958 to 1992), with expos again showing technological advances in structural technologies. The fourth period can be identified by sustainable considerations (1980 – 2000): essential topics of the world expos were sustainable awareness, recyclable material, energy-saving material, and technologies. The most recent period can be defined as a technical revolution (2000–2020) with improved computer resources.

Over time, there were other noticeable changes too: after the colonial period ended, more events were organized in Asia and far fewer in the traditional colonial powers (Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB), 2011). So, over the history of the World Expos, many changes were encountered, both architecturally, economically, politically, and technologically, which makes Thailand's continued choice of traditional architecture remarkable.

### **Thailand at World Expos**

In the early years of Siam's participation, the main goal was to counter the colonial threat by presenting the country as a culture-rich nation. In order to present itself this way, Thailand used traditional buildings, mostly Thai Salas or replicas of temples. On display were items showing Thai daily life and the country's riches.

Important historical factors explain why Thailand participated in the earliest World Fairs:

Showing the rich culture to colonial powers: Thailand participated in France and Britain in 1862, 1867, 1878, 1889, 1900, and 1937 to show culture and civilization. Culture, education, and architecture were motivations to participate in Vienna (1873) and Italy (1906 and 1911). Improving the existing friendship with the USA was one reason for participating in the World Expos (1867, 1893, 1904, 1915).

King Mongkut, Rama IV, played a driving force in the participation of Thailand, as well as decisions regarding the construction of the pavilion and the selection of items to display at the World Expos. King Chulalongkorn, Rama V, and King Vajiravudh, Rama VI, followed in his footsteps. After the colonial threat disappeared, Thailand continued participating in the World Expos, partly because nationalism had become very important after the change to a constitutional monarchy, world wars, and military coups. In later years, nation branding for international trade became the most crucial driving force for participation.

### **Sala Thai**

The use of traditional architecture during the World Expo has several reasons. One is that the traditional Thai sala is a logical choice because it is authentic and recognizable. Furthermore, they can be found at all levels of society. Traditional resting places are along the canals or roads and in farm fields. They also served as meeting places, for example, at temples. Additionally, they have been used for branding in other circumstances: royal sales were donated as symbols of friendship worldwide by the Fine Arts Department, often dedicated to a king (Fine Arts Department, 1977). One such example is in Bandung, Indonesia, where a sala was built to commemorate the visits of King Chulalongkorn, Rama V, and King Prajadhipok, Rama VII.



**Figure 1.** Thai Sala in Bandung, Indonesia.

**From:** Intaraboonsom (2023)

Another reason the Sala Thai is a good choice is that this traditional architecture is easy to assemble and disassemble, which is beneficial for temporary structures such as those used at the World Expo.

Finally, a key characteristic of Thai architecture is adaptation over time, which makes the Sala Thai a good representative of Thai architectural identity, as it has also adapted over time.

These are all reasons why the Thai Sala was chosen as the national symbol of architecture.

The Thai Pavilion for the 1937 World Expo is an excellent example of why Sala Thai was so popular as the chosen architecture for World Expos. Phra Phromphisit initially designed it after the Aisawan Thipphaya—at royal pavilion at Bang Pa-in Palace. The pavilion was constructed in Thailand and then re-assembled at the site, as was common in those days. However, architect M. C. Samaichaloem Kridakorn revised it as a sala sitting on a high base, showing many of the characteristics that made the sala so successful for pavilions: the ability to assemble and disassemble without much effort and the adaptability of this design. Furthermore, it shows the link

to royal buildings, religion, and Thai culture in general. Finally, it also has aesthetic value, is based on authentic buildings, and is unique. The Thai Sala of the 1937 World Expo ended up in a museum after its use, as shown in Figure 2.

Nevertheless, replicas of temples are also often used, as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 2.** Sala Thai used at the 1937 World Expo in Paris

**From:** National Archives of Thailand (1937)



**Figure 3.** Sala Thai used for the 1904 World Expo in St. Louis, USA, 1904

**From:** Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB) (2011)

A complicating factor in the selection of the architecture used at the World Expo is that modern identity is difficult to define. Part of this can be traced back to the time when Kings Rama IV and Rama V invited foreign architects to lead Thailand's architectural designs, causing a blended, unclear style. Around the same time, Thai architects started to study abroad after the 1930s and were influenced by foreign styles, thus losing some ability to develop their style. Furthermore, the authoritarian governments around the middle of the 20th century provided few opportunities for creativity since the main architectural designs had to match the desired image of national unity.

### Conception Framework

The research concept to answer the critical research question involves literature research on nation branding and Thai architecture, particularly the Thai sala. Then, it explores why the Thai sala was chosen as a representative architecture at the World Expos. Further research was done on the history of World Expos, especially Thailand's pavilions at these World Expos. Finally, the historical factors that influenced the pavilions' architectural designs were investigated. Some case studies of other national branding campaigns were compared to Thailand's branding campaign. Additionally, interviews were held with experts in the fields of architecture, tourism, and branding to collect their viewpoints on the history of Thai architectural identity, what caused changes, how it is used for the World Expos, and what the opportunities, reasons, or disadvantages might be for a change to a more modern design.



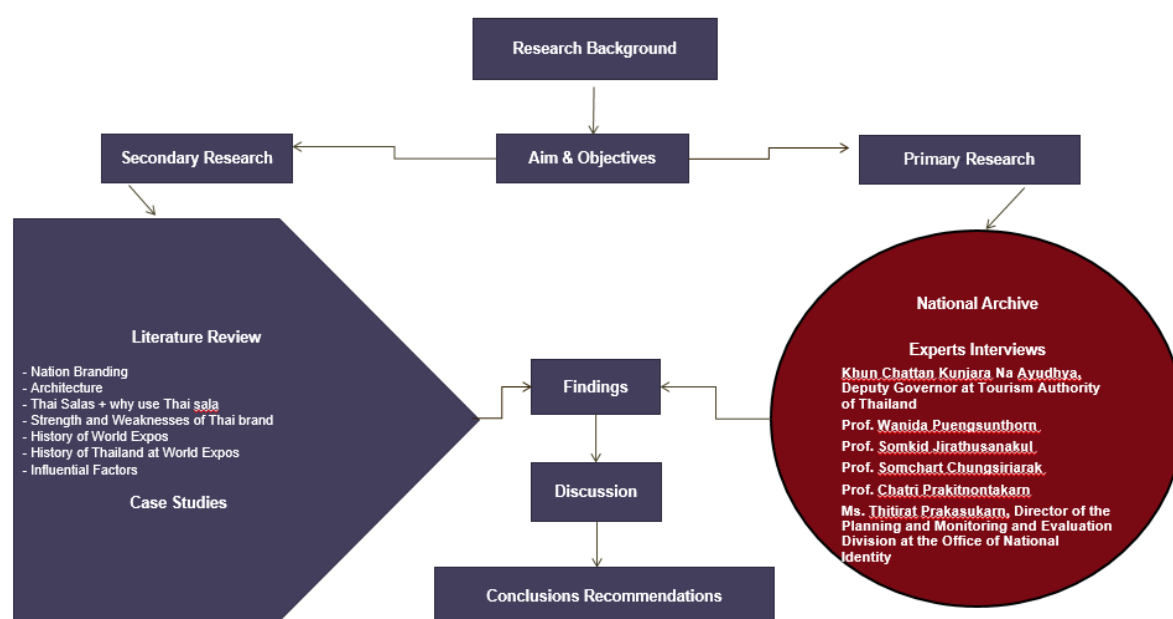


Figure 4. Framework for the research

## Research Methodology

This research was qualitative. Research tools include visits to the national archive and interviews with tourism, architecture, and national branding experts. The research covered the World Expos from 1851 until now, wherever they were held in the world, but focuses on the Thai pavilions used during those events.

Step 1) Visit the national archive and research secondary sources of information to find the architecture used for the pavilions at the World Expos. Study the historical factors influencing the design.

Step 2) Interview key experts. These experts are:

Somchart Chungsiriarak, Associate Professor Silpakorn University, Faculty of Architecture, an expert on Thai architecture, October 12, 2022

Somkid Jirathusanakul, Associate Professor Silpakorn University, Faculty of Architecture, expert on Thai architecture, October 13, 2022

Ms. Wanida Puengsunthorn, Instructor Silpakorn University, Faculty of Architecture, National Artist in Thai Architecture October 17, 2022

Interview with Chatri Prakitnontakarn, Ph.D., Professor Silpakorn University, Faculty of Architecture, an expert on Thai architecture, November 8, 2022

Thitirat Prakasukarn, Director of the Planning and Monitoring and Evaluation Division Office of National Identity, November 15, 2022

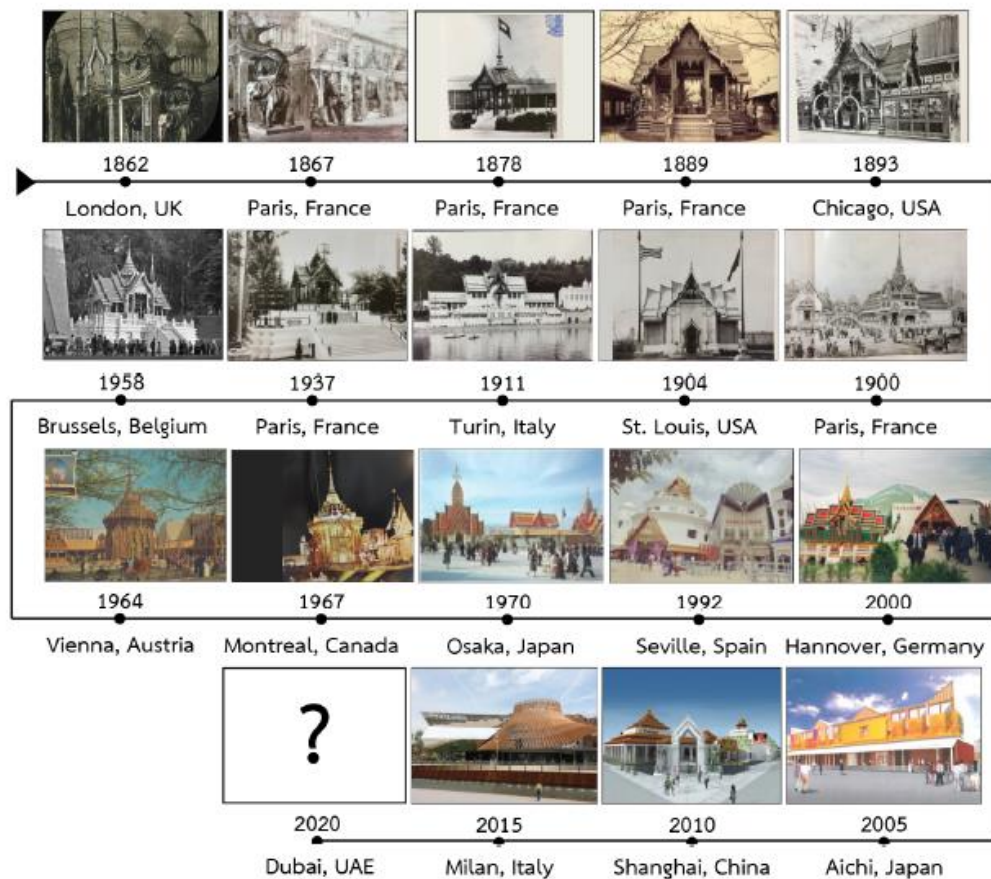
Mr. Chattan Kunjara Na Ayudhya, Deputy Governor at the Tourism Authority of Thailand, December 26, 2022

## Research Results

Objectives 1.1 and 1.2: The history of the Thai pavilion at the World Expos and the historical events that played a role in the architectural designs were researched. The research found that despite significant economic and technological changes, world wars, industrialization, and a change-over from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy, there were relatively few changes to the architectural designs of the Thai Pavilions at the World Expos and, therefore, relatively few differences in how the country delivered its national brand identity. The period of time covering the World Expo also saw changes in architectural tendencies, from gigantism to moderate designs to sustainable considerations (López-César, 2019).

These changes certainly impacted the pavilions of other countries but had minimal impact on the designs of the Thai Pavilion. Inviting foreign architects for leading positions in Thailand had a limited impact on Thai designs, as did sending Thai architects to study abroad. Even the location of the World Expos has had a limited impact on the presentation of the pavilion (Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB), 2011).

One of the main results of the research is that the presentation of the pavilion has mostly stayed the same over the years. The following figure gives a good indication of this:



**Figure 5.** Pavilion style over the years.

From: Jagoonchorn and Horayangkura (2022)

In recent years, the pavilions have changed to a more modern look. Even so, they hold on to traditional elements. For example, the most recent pavilion in Dubai looks as follows, using traditional elements such as the entrance looking a bit like a traditional Thai gabled roof while also representing a traditional Thai greeting, a "Wai." Additional "Thai" elements include the use of gold and flowers. (Digital Economy Promotion Agency (DEPA), 2022)

In an article, Ms. Umari Channarong, Thailand Pavilion Director for Index Creative Village Public Company Limited, stated that it is essential to realize that the World Expo is not an architecture show but a show for the audience, mostly the general public, of the location of the World Expo. The designers, who have won multiple awards for World Expo design in the past, made a well-informed choice to use culture (Jan. 2022). This culture can represent itself in soft power, daily live shows, and architecture.



**Figure 6.** Traditional Thai Culture Music and Dance in front of the Thai Pavilion World Expo Dubai 2020

**From:** Bangkok Post (2021)

## Discussion

Part of the reason for the continued use of traditional architecture or elements is that Thai pavilions using traditional architecture had success in the past. Another reason is that contemporary architectural identity is hard to define. Nevertheless, most architectural experts I interviewed believe a more modern pavilion could be possible. For example, Prof. Wanida stated: "The design of the building can be modern as long as it is unique. Culture can also be shown through other means." (Prof. Wanida Puengsunthorn, Instructor, Silpakorn University, Faculty of Architecture, National Artist in Thai Architecture, interviewed on October 17, 2022). Similarly, Prof. Prakitnontakarn stated, "The architecture used at the Expo can be modern. The world expos have changed, so pavilions can also change over time." (Prof. Chatri Prakitnontakarn, Professor Silpakorn University, Faculty of Architecture, an expert on Thai architecture, interviewed on November 8, 2022)

The Director of the Planning and Monitoring and Evaluation Division Office of National Identity, interviewed on November 15, 2022, feels changes to the traditional designs for pavilions are not a good idea. Ms. Prakasukarn thought, "Success over time is because of traditional design, uniqueness, differentiation, and authenticity. These must be maintained. The building should show fine craftsmanship. Inside the building, you can show modern Thainess." (Ms. Thitirat Prakasukarn, Director of the Planning and Monitoring and Evaluation Division Office of National Identity, November 15, 2022)

All agree that the process for selecting the winning bidder for the pavilion's construction favors the traditional powerhouse companies and has relatively limited input from the younger generation of architects. As Ms. Prakasukarn stated, "Most senior decision-makers are older." Furthermore, they agree that previous pavilions have been successful; for example, "Encouragement for different designs is limited by previous successes." (Prof. Chatri Prakitnontakarn)

All experts interviewed also agreed that cultural identity is needed at the World Expo. In that case, though, this raises the question of what Thainess is in architecture. Horayangkura (2017) stated that Thai architectural characteristics are based on the way of life, including living in harmony with nature, adapting to changes over time, and making clever use of available space and light. They are also a reflection of the belief system. Given this definition, contemporary and traditional architecture can be used at the World Expo. However, there is still a reluctance to do so for the reasons mentioned above, mainly the selection process for the winning bid and the requirement for uniqueness and authenticity.

On top of that, "the style of the Thai pavilion used in the World Expos has not changed because we cannot find the essence of Thailand. Thais themselves have yet to find the essence of being Thai themselves. When he could not find it, he could only pick up the old one and use it." (Prof. Somkid Jirathusanakul, Associate Professor Silpakorn University, Faculty of Architecture, an expert on Thai architecture, interviewed on October 13, 2022) Similarly, Prof. Chungsiriarak stated, "On the one hand, you want to show modernity. Western civilization, but at the same time, you feel that you are not 100% Westerner; you still want to keep your cultural roots (Prof. et al., University, Faculty of Architecture, an expert on Thai architecture, interviewed October 12, 2022).

## New Knowledge

Normally, if historical events happen, one would expect society and culture to change as a function of those events. Similarly, architecture, a reflection of culture, would also be expected to change accordingly, but this was not the case, at least for the Thai Pavilions at the World Expos. This remarkable finding that traditional architecture still has a big impact on the designs of these pavilions is factual until very recently: only the last two World Expos have seen a more symbolic use of Thai tradition, but they do not necessarily represent a modern identity of Thai architecture.

This modern identity is hard to define, so traditional architecture keeps making a comeback at the World Expos.

## Conclusion

In summary, the many historical events that impacted Thailand as a nation and global events impacting economics, technology, and politics have not significantly impacted the design of the Thai pavilions at the World Expo. Only recently, the desire to feel "modern" has caused some changes, but newer buildings with symbolism still connect to traditional architecture.

Remarkably, the chosen representation of the Thai pavilion at the World Expos has held on to its traditional designs or elements despite the significant historical changes, including architectural, economic, political, and technological changes over time.

Countries will try to use culture and architecture to differentiate their country from others and make it appear unique. Traditional architecture has been used since it matches the requirements of authenticity and differentiation.

Due to the success of Thailand's pavilions at past World Expos, it has been challenging to change their appearance significantly. Implementing a significant change in representation at once has the risk of losing your brand image and identity in one show. Branding is a long-term process. Losing your image can be hard to recover from. This is a risk the government appears unwilling to take.

Only when modern Thai architecture can be better defined and accepted, will it be easier to move on from the relatively successful traditional architecture for the designs of Thai pavilions at the World Expo. However, those features have recently become more symbolic rather than physical.

## Suggestions

### 1. Suggestions for Usage

I hope that the research can contribute to an improved process for selecting Thai pavilions and improve communications between experts involved in the World Expos, such as architects and branding experts.

## 2. Suggestions for Further Research

Not many changes have occurred over time in the physical presentation of Thailand's architectural identity at the World Expos. The architectural representation is still primarily based on traditional elements of Thai architecture. Future research could expand on the current research by further delving into the right balance between modern and contemporary designs and balancing the desires of architects and brand experts.

Further research will be needed to determine how we can accurately establish the identity of modern architecture in Thailand and find the right balance between contemporary and traditional architecture for use in the Thai Pavilion at the expos.

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