

“STONE SOUP”: A PARTICIPATORY URBAN GAME FOR BETTER PLANNING PRACTICES

ABSTRACT

If urbanism and architecture have the tools to conduct urban planning practices, when the objective is to adopt a participatory approach, there are several ways to implement it.

“Stone Soup” is an urban game that aims to improve urban planning practices through community participation. More specifically, we developed it, considering adaptation and mitigation to climate change on the one hand, and urban health on the other.

The name derives from a Portuguese myth in which a substantial soup is made from sparing ingredients. In the game form, it was developed in the context of the CliCCHE Erasmus+ project, integrating a participatory approach.

In this article, we will review participatory approaches in architecture and in urban planning in the Portuguese context. After that, we will describe the “Stone Soup” urban game, one of the methodological tools proposed in the context of CliCCHE. This tool aims to take the perspectives of different social actors into account, from residents and local associations to municipal technicians, architects, and academic professionals, and to encourage urban planning strategies more adequate to the present and to the climate challenges of our cities, promoting equal and horizontal participation.

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1. PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES IN ARCHITECTURE. THE CASE OF PORTUGAL

In the context of the ClicCHE project, as mentioned in this volume in different ways, the authors of this article had the opportunity to contribute with their expertise in social sciences, urban studies, and architecture. When the moment of building a methodology arose, we made suggestions trying to integrate these different disciplinary perspectives. In this article, we dedicate special attention to describing the “Stone Soup” tool, a participatory methodological tool that will be explained after presenting the Portuguese context, considering participatory processes in architecture. The final part of the article is dedicated to recounting the experiences with the “Stone Soup” urban game and analysing the results, thereby showing the potential and limitations of this tool, which can be useful for sustainable urban planning. Urban games can be considered as an engaging training course based on game simulation, not necessarily associated with digital games, oriented towards the construction of visions, scenarios and projects for the future. The players (students and citizens who take part in them) experience forms of interaction through a game form - they learn and interact with each other (Brkovic Dodig & Groat, 2019; Traetta, Toto & Lombardi 2021). Mela Kosher offers specific suggestions for designing an urban game, warning that attention should be paid to the game’s physical demands (Kocher 2019: 273).

Urban games are often linked to participatory processes that, in architecture, are framed within a debate encompassing the discipline’s history, mainly from the mid-1950s onward. The debate over participation in public housing neighbourhoods began primarily in the 1970s. For that matter, one of the references is the Italian architect Giancarlo De Carlo, who defines how the architect should dialogue with others, especially the project’s users, aiming to build an architecture of participation (De Carlo, 2013).

Following De Carlo, form and context are interconnected, and the architectural process is not linear, but reticular, composed of networks and actors. The author believed that architectural forms modify human behavior and that a system of complex forms forms the context, and sometimes contradictory, social forces (De Carlo, 2013: 48). To address the issue between architectural form and social context, he calls for an architecture of participation, guaranteed “when everyone intervenes equally in the management of power (...) or when power no longer exists because everyone is directly and equally involved in the process of decision-making” (*Idem*: 61).

One of the most notable participatory processes in the Portuguese context was the SAAL (Local Ambulatory Support Service). The program was launched in 1974, by order of the then Secretary of State for Housing and Urban Planning, the architect Nuno Portas.

Presenting itself as an instrument of political action, it was, without doubt, an unprecedented experience on the national scene in terms of what we today call participatory processes, becoming an alternative for resolving the housing problems of the time (Madeira da Silva et al., 2016). Following this singular experience in the panorama of architectural practice in Portugal, others followed, the foundations of which derive from SAAL (see authors who have extensively analysed it, as Bandeirinha 2007, Costa & Costa, 2022, etc).

In 1974, the housing situation in Portugal was worrying. It was estimated that the country lacked more than 600,000 dwellings and around 25% of the population was in unlivable conditions (Bandeirinha, 2007: 68). Therefore, SAAL fits into a particular political period in Portuguese history, shortly after the end of the dictatorial regime, which occurred with the Carnation Revolution on April 25, 1974, and within the scope of PREC – Ongoing Revolutionary Process— which had a set of actions that included housing and other areas related to social rights.

Nuno Portas stated that the most original feature of the program was, perhaps, the ability to delegate management to the residents’ associations, “so that participation does not become just another illusion or a more sophisticated form of co-optation, there needs to be a true influence or decision-making power on the part of those who want to participate” (Portas, 1984: 26).



Fig. 1 - Film cover of the “As Operações SAAL” of João Dias © Manuel Dias.
Source: <https://www.agendalx.pt/events/event/as-operacoes-saal-de-joao-dias/>



Fig. 2 - Presentation of an architectural model in a SAAL operation, 1976 © Fernando Bagulho. Photo taken from Pires, C. (2023, 15 April). Operações SAAL: pode a habitação em Lisboa aprender com este sonho de Abril?. *A mensagem*. Source: <https://amensagem.pt/2023/04/25/operacoes-saal-habitacao-lisboa-sonho-de-abril/>

Despite lasting just over two years, it was a program that turned into a process (Santos, 2024: 46) because it knew how to combine architectural design with self-construction, and the right to housing with the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1967), dialoguing between the various levels of governance - State and local power - and with popular participation (Portas, 1986).

The first results began to appear when the program was revoked. The architect Teotónio Pereira considered SAAL as a “program dead at birth, just when its practical results were beginning” and “At the time of the Ministerial Order that “shifted” SAAL’s competence to the municipalities, 169 operations were in operation across the country, involving almost 42 thousand families. There were 2,259 homes under construction and the start of another 5,741 was imminent.” (Bandeirinha, 2007: 14; 52-53). Despite its short existence, this program produced interesting results, being perceived as best practice in international literature (e.g., the Casabella journal) and continuing, even today, to be an innovative reference in the Portuguese context.

However, the spirit of service and dialogue between experts and populations tended to be lost, and, with isolated exceptions, there were no similar experiences until the end of the 20th century. The populations were not called to participate, not even when, in the 1990s, a large-scale social housing policy was implemented.

In the 2000s, the international financial crisis changed the paradigm of architect participation in society. As De Carlo puts it, “If until then the theme of participation in architecture focused largely on the perspective of user integration throughout the entire ‘architectural operation’” (De Carlo, 2010), from that moment on, the place and the role of the architect in the social territory where he or she intervenes, changed. (Madeira da Silva et. al., 2016). Portugal was no exception. Therefore, from 2008 onwards, the change in the social and economic context led the architect’s activity to a paradigm shift in relation to professional practice: the traditional model developed in a studio centered on the cycle that goes from commissioning the project to the construction of the building continued, but new architectural intervention practices emerged, including activities related to society’s intervention in the implementation of projects. These new practices, called “emerging practices”, an expression used by Luís Santiago Baptista to define the production of “young Portuguese architects in times of crisis” (Baptista, 2014: 20), granted the intervention and practice of the architect greater participation from society and, alongside that, a greater relevance of the cultural, social, ethical and political dimensions, together with the technical and aesthetic dimensions, of their work.

At the international level, new critical concepts emerge challenging the architect's participation in society, and pointing to greater proactivity by the same architect in defining territorial intervention strategies – this is the case of the Urban Curating concepts (cf. Bunschoten, 2003); unsolicited architecture (cf. Bouman, 2007); Critical Spatial Practice (cf. Miessen, 2010); Space Agency (cf. Awan et al., 2011).

Following the international trend of a critical approach, the architect Inês Moreira (2010) refers to the term “spatial practices”, in the context of the production made by young Portuguese architects. According to Inês Moreira, these practices indicate ‘an “undoing” of the authorial centrality, of drawing or of the dominant «architecture»’ (Moreira *apud* Baptista, 2012: 99), insofar as “the authors involved enunciate economic issues, corporate and architectural policies and expose the desire to build a collective project’ (*Ibidem*). Although they do not recognise themselves as a generation, the practices of these young architects are characterised, according to Baptista (2011), by collective organisation and/or interdisciplinary collaboration. They are even nicknamed ‘generation z’ by *arq.a* magazine (cf. Baptista, 2011), considering the previous generations x and y, identified by Pedro Gadanho and Luís Tavares Pereira, in the ‘Metaflux’ exhibition in 2004. Ferreira (2014) highlights an important aspect to maintain: the architect must assume himself as a promoter of local intervention initiatives, and creative social strategies can generate socio-territorial innovation (Ferreira: 2014). Scientific literature on the architectural profession in the context of current transformations is scarce. There are two surveys commissioned by the Order of Architects in 2006 (Villaverde Cabral and Borges, 2006) and in 2013 (cf. Ravara et al., 2013), in addition to a book, by Pedro Brandão (2006), which allow us to understand the evolution of the profession of architects in Portugal. However, little or no emphasis is given in these studies to the “emerging practices”. These practices were presented in the following years at Exhibitions, such as “GENERATION Z#1 collectives of architects” in 2009, held at the Order of Architects’ headquarters, where different collectives participated (such as Kaputt, ateliermob, the Embaixada and the Blaanc). Another exhibition to be highlighted was *Tanto Mar, Portugueses fora de Portugal*, presented at the Belém Cultural Center (CCB) in 2014, whose curators were part of the ateliermob. It is no coincidence that Ateliermob was the main stakeholder of Iscte for the CliCCHE project. Their perspective on collaboration and participation was crucial for this collective.

In addition to these exhibitions, there were other moments of publicity, such as the cycle of Conferences “Os Universalistas” in 2018, which was held at the *Casa da Arquitetura*, where, together with renowned architects, collectives

such as Embaixada, Artéria, Error 43, the Fala, the DEPA, and the COMOCO attended and participated. Despite the relatively scarce literature, the magazine *arq.a* published three volumes dedicated to Generation Z (between October 2009 and December 2011), along with a volume of the journal A21 (May 2010), which cover theme was “Map of young spatial practices” (*Mapa de Jovens Práticas Espaciais*), a research by the aforementioned architect Inês Moreira. To conclude this section, it is important to note that there is a common denominator among young architects from Generation Z: they see themselves as promoters of local intervention initiatives and of creative social strategies capable of generating socio-territorial innovation.

2. THE MAKINGS OF THE STONE SOUP

The “Stone Soup” tool was developed within the framework of the ClicCHE project, which aimed to develop training programs for higher education students and urban planning professionals to enhance planning competencies, considering climate change and its effects on urban health, as well as the adaptation and mitigation of these effects. The project started with a literature review (Kyprianou et al., 2023); after that, the teams from the five participating universities (Università di Camerino; Cyprus Institute; National Research Council CNR; University of Belgrade; ISCTE) elaborated the teaching methodology, which included the production of specific tools. This methodology stipulated that the training program involved selecting a case study that could be a city neighbourhood, in which a planning action would ultimately be exercised to improve sustainable urban life, considering specific environmental problems of a given population and place. To this end, an important section of this methodology is dedicated to deepening knowledge about the location and the target population, which we termed “Local Inquiry and Mapping- Getting to know the neighborhood from above and from within”.

Within this context of deepening knowledge of local reality, a set of qualitative methodological tools were adapted: i) “15 Minutes Proximity”, based on 15 minutes-city concept (Moreno et al., 2021), which aims to understand the accessibility to a variety of services within a 15-minutes timeframe in a given territory; ii) “Interviewing,” which, as the name suggests, focuses on the interview as a qualitative methodological tool, facilitated by the suggestion of developing an interview guide and informed consent; iii) “Photo Elicitation,” aimed at knowing better the local population either through photographs previously taken by the population (showing photo albums) or through images recorded in the moment and explained by the residents;

iv) “Recording Fieldnotes,” proposes that students/researchers write down about what they observe during fieldwork (including reflections, descriptions of events, etc); v) “Walking as a Research Method,” intended to carry out territorial knowledge with the assistance of residents, through informed and informative walks. Finally, the “Stone Soup”, an experience of a participatory activity that can also be considered, to a certain extent, an urban game, which we will describe subsequently, is also part of this package. In total, the Toolkit comprises 24 fully described activities, incorporating classic pedagogical tools such as debates and the presentation of works, as well as diverse environmental condition-monitoring activities. All these tools can be consulted and utilised in the project results at www.clicche.org.

Returning to the main topic of this paper: What is the “Stone Soup” urban game, and why did we give it this name?

The “Stone Soup” name comes from the traditional Portuguese legend with the same name. We draw upon the book “Portuguese Legends” in Costa’s (2014) version. Briefly, the story tells of a monk who was begging in the plains and, feeling tired, knocked on the door of a wealthy but miserly farmer. The monk picked up a stone from the ground and said he could make a good soup from it. The farmer didn’t believe him, so the monk asked for a pot to demonstrate how he would do it. After putting the pot on the fire, he added the stone and asked for a cabbage leaf, which the farmer gave him, then a small piece of bacon, which the farmer provided, then a carrot, a potato, and a drizzle of olive oil. As these were small quantities, the farmer kept providing the ingredients without noticing he was doing so. In the end, he was amazed by the soup made with a stone, which seemed to him an authentic miracle.

In the game form, the tool was designed as an assessment instrument for an already completed planning project or as a participatory tool for new projects or parts of a planning project. Considering a specific location, a certain area, whether it be a neighbourhood with easily identifiable boundaries or other types of territorial parcels, the objective is to ensure the participation of the local population, while also gathering contributions from academia and public administration.

It is important to stress that the “Stone Soup” participatory urban game is not a digital tool, but an analog educational game. It involves the engagement not only of trainees, research and teaching staff, and populations, but also of so-called stakeholders, which in this case were embodied by local associations linked to the chosen territory, environmental associations, and personnel somehow connected to local administration.

As a game that aspires to effective participation, one of the objectives is to ensure this activity provides a safe space where contributions are anonymous, so everyone feels comfortable expressing suggestions for improving their territory and, sometimes, evaluating previous practices in the territory where they reside or work.



Fig. 3 - Pot with post-its used in the workshop in São João de Brito's neighbourhood. Photo: Teresa Madeira da Silva, 2023.

The metaphor can be described as follows: the stone represents the future; the pot represents the neighbourhood/territory in question; the different ingredients (which in practice are post-its of different colours) represent categories to be improved or transformed.

Translating each color into ingredients and their respective categories, we have: olive oil, represented by yellow post-its, alluding to the project/planning; carrot, represented by orange post-its, alluding to local health; meat, represented by pink, suggesting issues related to toxicity, different types of pollution, or specific environmental challenges; cabbage, represented by green, obviously referring to green spaces; and finally water, represented by blue post-its, referring to water management. All of them are cross-cutting issues for urban territories.

As in the Stone Soup Portuguese legend, the outcome of this game is a lesson for all participants. So, in the end, a summary of the activity should be made, including the idea or ideas that everyone agrees with, along with the diversity of thoughts and suggestions that emerge throughout the game.

Therefore, how is the “soup” made in practice?

This tool, which can also be considered an urban (non-digital) game, should preferably be conducted at a table with chairs where all participants can sit, and lasts approximately 90 minutes, sufficient time to prepare and serve a soup figuratively. In terms of materials, a large pot, a wooden spoon, post-its in five different colours (blue, pink, orange, yellow, and green), a stone, and pens or pencils (one per participant) are needed. A whiteboard or other vertical support is also necessary to organise the written material.

Participants include students, teachers, research staff, local community members (residents who may or may not be involved in local politics, people from one or more local associations), individuals linked to local administration, which in the Portuguese case typically corresponds to parishes and city councils, in various domains, from institutions under municipal supervision (examples: a library, an environmental office, a municipal service such as water and sanitation), to schools and other areas. In practice, the selection of local participants depends on the specific themes defined by the activity organisers and the existing partnerships between universities/schools and local institutions. Regarding the number of participants in Stone Soup, it should ideally not exceed 25 people to ensure effective participation.

The Soup will be prepared by the activity mediator, considering the following steps:

- The pot with the wooden spoon and the stone are placed in front of the mediator;
- The mediator will explain the game, and this task may take about 10 minutes: he or she will explain the game, including all steps;
- The mediator distributes post-its in different colours to each participant and shows the pot where the “ingredients” will be placed;
- The mediator invites the participants to write their suggestions in a few words on the post-its (whether for improvement, new implementation, etc.);
- Each participant will place their post-its in the pot (the task of writing and placing the post-its should take 15 minutes at most);
- The mediator mixes the “ingredients”.

This way, it will be impossible to know who wrote what. This is where this game differs from other similar ones using post-its, as these are mixed, regardless of whether they were written by university teachers, local inhabitants, local administration personnel, etc. This step is central because it guarantees the de-hierarchisation of each person’s social positionality, and explaining this condition at the beginning of the activity is equally important in ensuring a safe space for active participation.

- The facilitator asks for two volunteers to stick the post-its on a board, organising them by colour, a task that will take about 10 minutes;
- One of the volunteers will then read the content of the post-its, without interruptions, so that everyone in the room has a global and total notion of the contents;
- After this, all participants may intervene if they wish, with the common objective of identifying the most recurrent suggestions and discussing the diversity found.

During the time for interventions, one of the participants will make a summary that will be shared in the end in a written, oral, and/or visual format, as long as the recording of the result and its sharing with the relevant parties (architects, urban planners, local officials, etc.) is ensured.

3. SOUPS THAT HAVE ALREADY BEEN MADE

The first time we put this tool into practice was within the scope of the CliCCHE project, precisely with the intention of testing the tool before including it in the Toolkit. Therefore, all tools have been tested before becoming part of the CliCCHE Toolkit. The testing of each tool was carried out by students linked to the universities participating in the project, who, along with researchers and teachers, evaluated the degree of success in implementing the tools. In the case of tools developed in the Portuguese context, Sopa da Pedra proved to be one of the most successful, based on students' experience and subsequent evaluations. Some tools also include e-learning versions. A PowerPoint presentation is accompanied by an audio description of the development of this same tool.

In the Portuguese case, the students who put the tools into practice did so within the scope of the Workshop “How to make Healthier Places?”, with activities at Iscte (mainly lectures and debates), at the Coruchéus Library, in the Parish of Alvalade, Lisbon, and in the neighbourhood of São João de Brito, in the same parish. The library served as a place where data and results from interactions with residents of the São João de Brito neighbourhood were worked on. Before holding the workshop, the project's coordination in the Portuguese context established partnerships with several entities, including the Residents' Association of the aforementioned neighbourhood and, of course, the Coruchéus Library.

Fig. 4 - Map of the São João de Brito's neighbourhood. Source: Google Earth, adapted by the authors.





UPPER FIGURE

Fig. 5 - São João de Brito's neighbourhood. Photo: Teresa Madeira da Silva, 2023.

RIGHT FIGURE

Fig. 6 - São João de Brito's neighbourhood. Photo: Teresa Madeira da Silva, 2023.



Sopa da Pedra is activated on the last day of the workshop, after the display of the results produced by the students enrolled in the Workshop. In this first soup, students, teachers, researchers (from ISCTE and LNEC), neighbourhood residents, library staff, and two people from the Zero association, dedicated to protecting the environment, participated. This set of differentiated roles was specifically aimed at the diversity of participants and at an equitable approach to their roles, so that all contributions counted equally. The game took place as previously described. However, in terms of writing on the post-it notes, despite being asked to write an expression or a short sentence, some people wrote several lines in small font.

The reference context was an urban planning action carried out before the workshop (about a year earlier) in the District of São João de Brito, initiated by Lisbon Council. Given the presence of the CliCCHE project in the neighbourhood and the knowledge acquired by students and residents, all categories (local plan, water management, green spaces, pollution, and health) were included in the game, leaving the soup complete with all the ingredients.

Regarding the local plan (yellow), the post-its referred to recent works and to what should be considered to improve the spaces. For example, there is a need for more organised, fair parking; more social spaces; greater security; and a neighbourhood van to help with mobility. In terms of health, this dimension ended up being associated with pollution, green spaces and accessibility, that is, with health problems linked to climate change and possible adaptations/solutions, but also with mental health, which was interesting to verify.

Regarding green spaces, there was unanimity among the social actors who collaborated in the game. In other words, the need for more and better green spaces was mentioned, along with more specific topics such as arranging waiting spaces, using local flora to improve spaces, and creating more shaded spaces.

Regarding pollution/toxicity, the pink post-it, there was also unanimity on one aspect: removing the airport from the city, as the neighbourhood is directly adjacent to Humberto Delgado International Airport. Excessive noise caused by planes is seen as the biggest problem, even though residents contacted at the workshop mentioned that they had become accustomed to the noise over time. One of the solutions presented, which could be applied in the short to medium term, is vegetation barriers, which greatly dampen noise not only from the airport but also from the circular road network. For water management, the need to regulate its use was highlighted through training, planning, and environmentally more favourable suggestions for the water economy.

Following the reading of all the post-its, there was a debate that lasted around 25 minutes. In total, 20 people participated in the game: 7 students, 4 stakeholders, 3 residents of the parish of Alvalade (2 from the São João de Brito neighbourhood), 3 from the organisation Iscte (teachers and researchers), 1 observer, and 2 public administration members.

Fig. 7 - Making of the Stone Soup during the workshop. Two volunteers stick the post-its on a board. TMS, 2023.





Fig. 8 - Making of the Stone Soup during the workshop. One of the volunteers read the content of the post-its. TMS, 2023.

After this first experience, which was well received by the participants, the pan, the wooden spoon and the stone were taken to two other experiments, as part of scientific dissemination activities, promoted within the scope of the research center where the tasks were developed. from the Portuguese team at ClicCHE, the CIES (Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology) at ISCTE. The first was at the European Researchers' Night 2023, and the second, as part of the celebration of Science and Technology Week 2023.

At the European Researchers' Night there was an opportunity for us to present this tool. It was an activity carried out over the course of an hour. People passed by the CIES stand, and the game was presented to children, young people and adults several times, both in Portuguese and in English. Participants were invited to write a suggestion for urban planning improvement in one or more Post-it categories/colours as long as they referred to the city of Lisbon. They could also leave their email addresses so we could send them the results, but no one did. Still, we kept the post-its.

The event in the context of Science and Technology Week, 2023 edition, took place at ISCTE precisely on National Scientific Culture Day, November 24th. Sopa da Pedra was one of the activities carried out with high school students. We had a class from a high school to play the game. The space chosen to think during the game was the school of the students present, including the school spaces and utilities. Everyone participated by writing on post-its. This time, however, we subdivided the participants into categories, so each subgroup had a post it color. The students made improvement suggestions and raised concerns, and they got involved in the game, showing contentment.

These two experiences, held beyond the CliCCHE project, show that the Stone Soup game is a flexible tool that can be implemented with groups of different ages and in diverse spaces.

Fig. 9 - Presentation of the methodological tool «Stone Soup» at the European Researchers' Night, September 2023. Photo: Sofia Rocha





Fig. 10 - World Science Day, Iscte, November 24th 2023. Photo: Caterina Di Giovanni, 2023.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The “Sopa da Pedra” tool is not very different from other pedagogical tools that use sticky notes to attract participation from different types of actors (Christensen et al. 2020). However, considering the various experiences so far, the fact that it intends to be a safe space (where different social actors, from different social positions, are brought together with no distinction, because all ingredients go into the same pot) is interesting and was valued positively.

When reflecting on the significance of participatory methodologies, including this kind of analogue educational game, it is important to keep in mind that, despite their prevalence and relevance being beyond doubt, it is not easy for the results of participatory decisions to be actually taken into account in urban planning. A group of authors warn us of this, such as Eriksson et al. (2022), who investigated the effects of this type of participation, analysing a set of projects, and concluding that citizen participation, when it conflicts with legislation, ends up being ignored, since it has no chance of being carried out. Also, the goals projected by public policies might be a setback in this process, especially when residents don't feel represented by them.

A policy decision embodies a unique normative entity, constructed around sets of normative understandings (Fischer, 2000), that might not align with the directions desired by citizens. This gap between citizens' expectations and policy decisions is one of the issues to be resolved in public participation.

According to Falanga (2018, p. 301), "citizen participation has often become the instrument for political, economic, and social elites to reinforce predefined agendas with renewed legitimacy", leading to a "façade" of participation process in public decision-making with no effective operationalisation. The path to making the participation process effective in urban planning remains difficult and requires an appropriate evaluation of participatory processes in public policy.

To actually take into account the voice of citizens in urban planning, good conditions are needed to organise and ensure participation (Eriksson et al. 2002, see also Mort, Rodriguez-Giralt & Delicado 2020). Based on the experience with the "Stone Soup" tool, we can say that participants better understand the plans for their places of residence when the information is clear, and expectations are not disproportionate to what is foreseen.

Without intending to convey a new idea about urban planning and local participation, it is central that the current movement of young architects who incorporate participation into their projects is gaining strength, especially given the urgency of the climate crisis.

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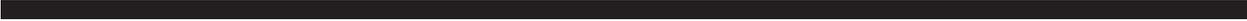
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