

# Captured Moments of Landscape Metamorphosis

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## **Abstract**

Landscape architecture students at the University of Ljubljana were encouraged to prepare temporal series of landscape and plant drawings to sharpen their sensitivity to changes in the perception of a land motive and vegetation morphology. Students chose a particular motive, defined the frame of the drawing, and identified characteristic plants on site. The motives were sketched several times during the year to portray seasonal changes. Specific environmental conditions (fog, rain, sunny day) were captured in drawings, and in the case of plants, drawings revealed the transitions of selected physiological events (budding, flowering, fruiting). These transformations were discussed in connection with landscape perception and as a tool in the design process.

## **Keywords**

On-site sketching, Vegetation, Transformation, Seasons, Phase drawing, Plant morphology

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## Introduction

Landscape motives and in particular, the vegetation that forms them, are subject to successive metamorphoses. Van Dooren (2017) claims that landscape architects recognize time as a key component when referring to their profession and practice. Analyses, interpretation of the site potential and the conceptual design of any spatial intervention should also incorporate the temporal aspect. Observing and drawing the motive over time can serve as a tool to generate ideas and recognition of the intrinsic value of the land and its seasonality. However, this process is rarely implemented in commercial or private plans due to the deadlines or budget set for project proposals. We strive to equip students to be alert to the changes in landscape elements, particularly in vegetation, and this visual essay represents the teaching process, combining drawing studio and plant material theory.

As stated by Louis Le Roy, everything in nature is always under constant transformation (Rosenheinreich et al., 2003) and in wild nature, as in landscaped urban parks, nothing is static. The representation of temporal changes of landscape in drawing was being offered by landscape architects as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Humprey Repton evaluated the role of time in design, Frederick Law Olmsted projected the development of his green open spaces into the future (van Dooren & Nielsen, 2018). When incorporating time into the design process, contemporary studies also acknowledge that temporal changes affect human perception of the space (Eroğlu et al., 2012). The experience of a specific site is different in a snow-covered terrain or when observing lush green tree canopies. In temperate climates, most woody plants are deciduous and undergo distinguishable seasonal changes. Plant morphogenesis represents an important factor in landscape design and the decision-making process as the feel of a place is closely linked to their cycles (Zhao et al., 2017).

An observer of a natural landscape motive, urban park or private garden may perceive the selected view as a frozen moment in time. However, what we observe is also linked to memories of the past and projections of the future (Bender, 2002). Particularly if the location is well known to us, former interactions with the landscape are intertwined with current attention to details we detect and apprehend. Individual plants, even the most inconspicuous ones, attract our interest if we have previously wandered through the landscape (Soukand & Kalle, 2010). Neuron connections in the brain inform the viewer of slight differences in the vegetation cycle or colour tones compared to the previous visit.

This ability can be developed or acquired through sketching on site. Freehand drawing is a powerful tool in landscape presentation as it creates a special bond between the observer and the motive, particularly in recurrent visits to the same site (Denerel & Birisci, 2019). It enables a selective vision of space and an analytical assessment of the motive in different situations, which can aid in planning for all seasons. In a design process, understanding seasonal variation is important for creating open spaces with optimal visual and functional attraction during different time periods. The principles of plant combinations in landscape design are thus often based on their phenological changeability (Eroğlu et al., 2012).

Due to restrictions linked to the COVID epidemics, the educational process at the Landscape Architecture school in Ljubljana, Slovenia, had to be modified substantially. As a part of extracurricular activities for undergraduate students, the professors suggested they draw the temporal evolution of landscapes and plants near their homes. In this way the students could sharpen their perception of a land motive or vegetation morphology. Each student chose a particular motive, defined the frame of the drawing (open landscape view, detail), suggested several situations and dates of sketching based on the most distinguishable changes in the motive and identified specific plants on site. In the initial step of the mentoring process the views were examined and, after preliminary sketches, the details of plants were

discussed and outlined. Compositions were observed from near (detailing) and far (abstraction); the experience of landscape was slowly transformed into the personal visual language of each participating student (Wylie et al., 2019).

Improving their skill in drawing *en plein air*, detecting the plant and landscape metamorphosis, was an appealing exercise for the students that improved their sensitivity to natural phenomena. Unlike architectural drawing, landscape drawing should incorporate time as well as space. Students developed their attentiveness to landscape components and proportions, as well as to small details that might go unnoticed in other presentation techniques. The process of sketching therefore not only reflected their personal style but also a particular awareness of the space that surrounded them. Time drawings noted the inevitable transformations of vegetation, which correlated with the impression of the landscape. By repeatedly drawing the same motive, accessing hilly sites, and slowly discovering various elements of their surroundings, the students incorporated information on different weather conditions, visibility and variation in highlights, predominant colour schemes, physiological changes, and the evolution of plant metamorphosis. The combination of all these factors shaped their experience of the space as they became aware of the importance of the yearly cycle. These personal experiences of landscape metamorphoses over time could be directly transferred to the design process and the students grew alert to the natural world dynamics, which are reflected in the atmosphere of the place. The examples presented here are typical: the regression and flooding of the Cerknica intermittent lake must be incorporated into the planning of recreational areas, trail systems and access roads; paths leading to Mount Saint Mary should be accessible in all seasons and the viewpoints set to frame wide vistas of the landscape below, even when the tall deciduous trees are in full leaf. The students discovered that the ambience experienced by the visitor changes dramatically depending on the season and that this changeability needs to be considered in landscape design if it is to be effective and site-sensitive.





FIGURE 1

**Winter drawing of the view from the southern slope of Mount Saint Mary.**

The path becomes even harder to access as the ground is frozen, slippery and partly covered in snow. Dark tree trunks stand out, groundcover plants are dormant, only patches of low grasses and moss cover the rocks. Shadows in the background are interrupted as we move further, and the colour scheme of the foreground is repeated where the sun lights the hill in the distance. The information between near and distant segments are in proportion, the visitor to the site is encouraged to pause and observe. The feel of the place is melancholic, which is emphasized by the colour scheme, ranging from amber, dark brown and yellow to grey, black, and olive green.

(Drawing by Tim Gerdin, 2020)





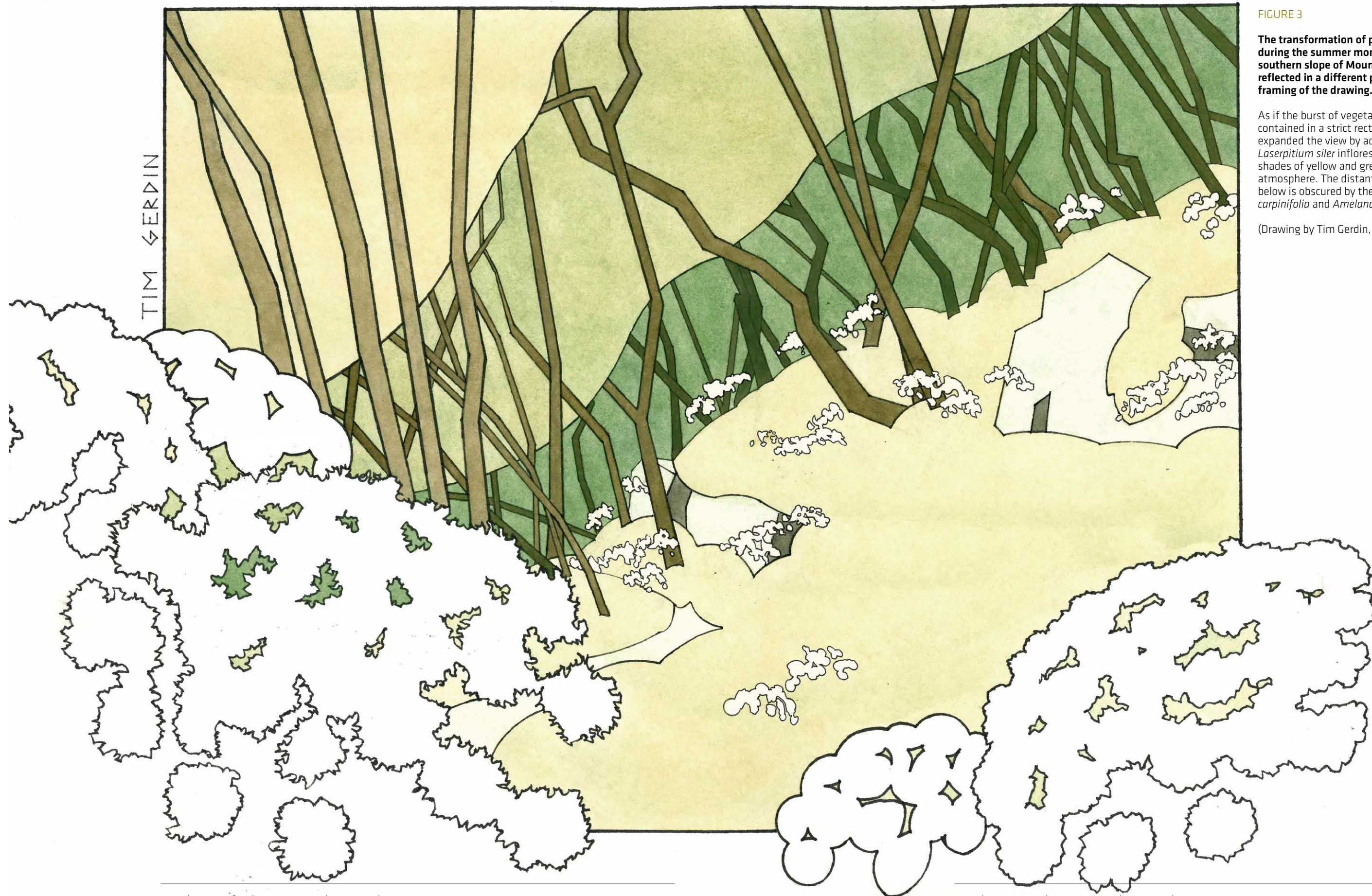
FIGURE 2

**The second in a series of yearly transformations of the view from the southern slope of Mount Saint Mary in Slovenia.**

Access to the site is only possible via a steep path and by frequently hiking to the location the student grew attentive to the details and plant transformations on each visit. In the foreground the bare trunks of *Ostrya carpinifolia*, exposed carbonate rocks and yellow inflorescences of the groundcover plant *Euphorbia amygdaloides* stand out in detail during a visit to the site in spring. The drawing focuses on the foreground where the student used brighter colours which capture the attention of the viewer. Although the frame encompasses a distant view of the Sava River and cultivated land, consisting of cornfields and grassland, these sections of the drawing are not emphasized.

(Drawing by Tim Gerdin, 2020)





TIM GERDIN

FIGURE 3

The transformation of plants and colour during the summer months on the southern slope of Mount Saint Mary is reflected in a different presentation and framing of the drawing.

As if the burst of vegetation could not be contained in a strict rectangle, the student expanded the view by adding layers of *Laserpitium siler* inflorescences. Calm shades of yellow and green mellow the atmosphere. The distant view of the land below is obscured by the canopies of *Ostrya carpinifolia* and *Amelanchier ovalis*.

(Drawing by Tim Gerdin, 2021)



FIGURE 4

**A series of drawings depict remarkable land metamorphoses in the Cerknica intermittent lake in central Slovenia.**

The first one is a winter landscape; the lake's surface is iced over, silhouettes of sedges and reeds rise above it. The student emphasized the brown shades of the foreground, which are contrasted with dark green conifers encircling the lake. The student presented the view of a cold, cloudy day but chose to sketch soft lines of light shining on the ice. These make the motive transient and expectant of the future.

(Drawing by Ria Ilersic, 2021)





FIGURE 5

**Spring in the Cerknica intermittent lake is the time when the water level is highest and darker blue and green shades prevail in the broad view.**

Alder trees, willow, dogwood shrubs and numerous perennials start their vegetation circle, and the contrast between conifers and deciduous trees diminishes. The student chose to draw the motive on a sunny spring day; patchy clouds are mirrored on the lake surface and the feeling of the place is playful.

(Drawing by Ria Ilersic, 2021)

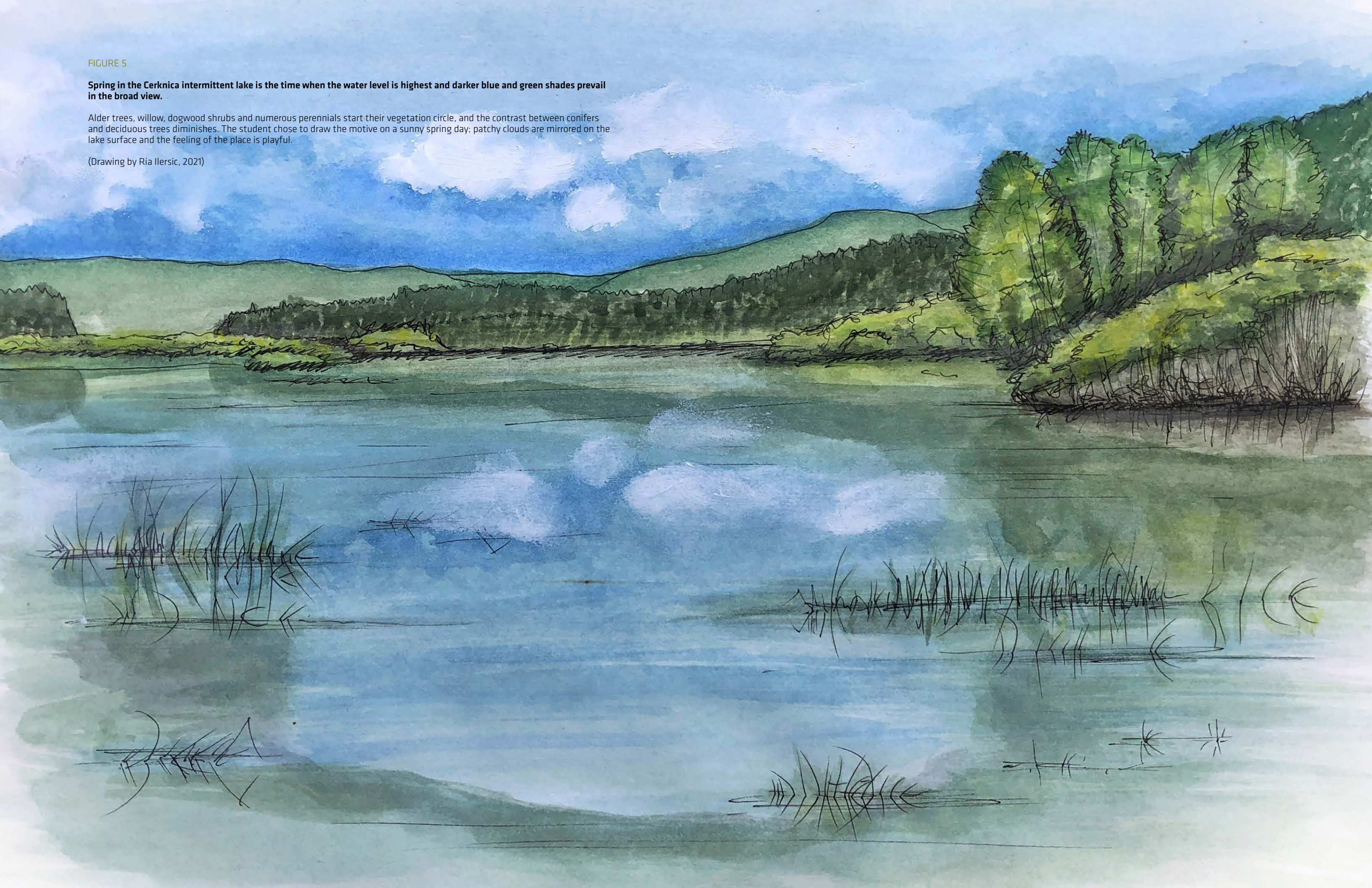




FIGURE 6

**Intermittent lakes are often totally dry in summer but in Cerknica there is always a small stream meandering through the landscape.**

The observer must study the drawing to detect it as the most apparent and emphasized characteristics of the motif are dry pits and depressions in the foreground. The colour scheme is of brown, earthy colours and green. The student's drawing did not focus on individual plant species as these are hardly recognizable; only the distinction between conifers and broadleaved trees can be sensed. The atmosphere is heavy, the heat of the summer day reinforced by the lack of clouds.

(Drawing by Ria Ilersic, 2020)





FIGURE 7

**Autumn rains slowly fill up the Cerknica intermittent lake, the air is humid, the clouds cover the entire sky.**

Deciduous trees and shrubs are partly bare, sedges and grasses complete their annual vegetation. The colours of the water surface change to dark blue, the shadows of the lakeside vegetation make the area gloomy. Designing the trails and other recreational areas of the Cerknica intermittent lake must encompass all the annual changes. The area's accessibility changes markedly and maps of trail systems in different seasons could be prepared based on the drawings.

(Drawing by Ria Ilersic, 2021)

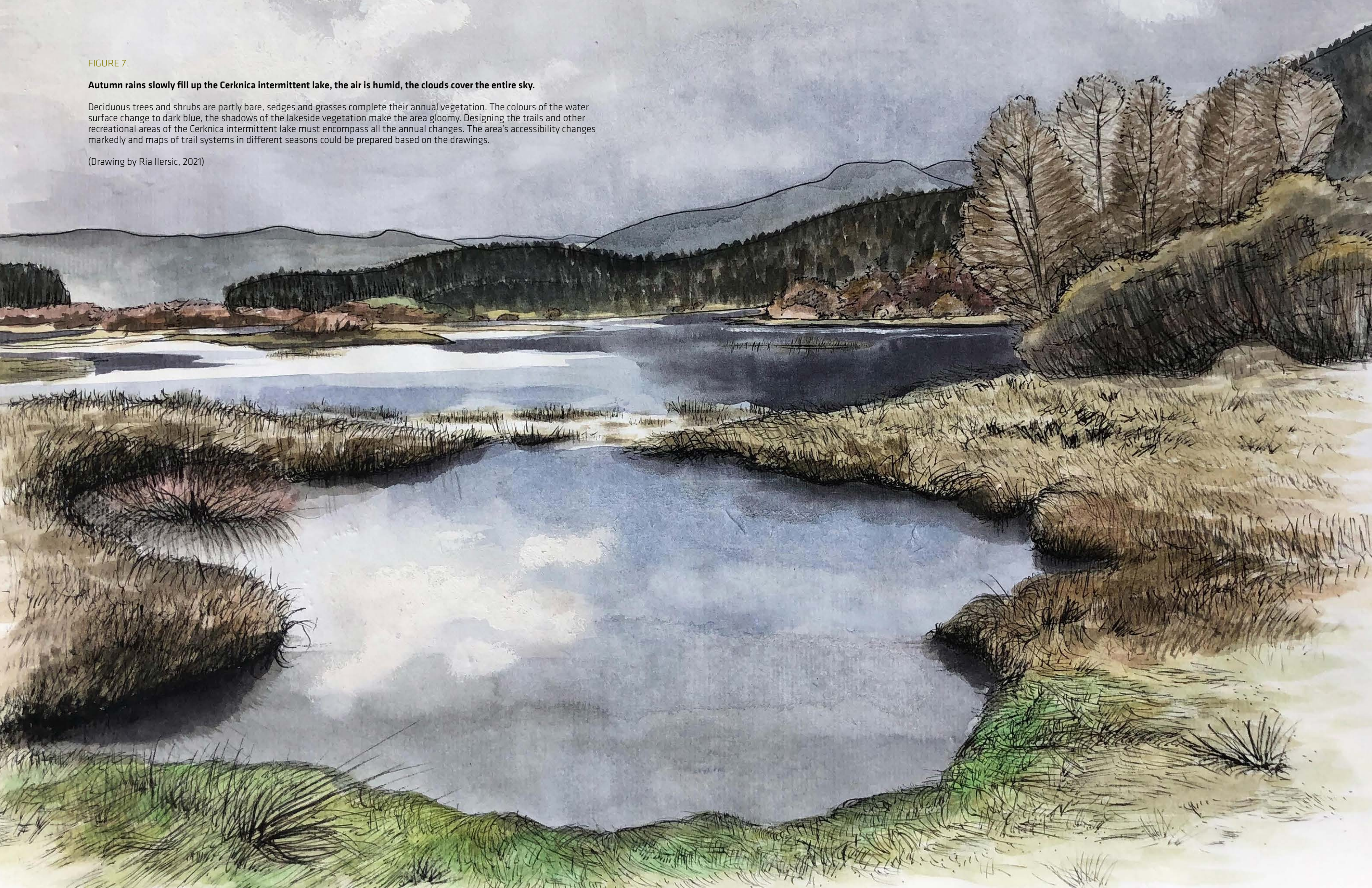






FIGURE 8

Deciduous plants undergo more pronounced changes in their yearly cycle and their transitions are considered when choosing plants for the design. The changes can be reflected in bright autumn colours, blooms, or fruit on bare branches. One of the students was fascinated by the metamorphoses of flowering and leafing in the black alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) and caught weekly transformations from flower buds (a, b) to fully developed leaves (c-f).

(Drawing by Anja Zaucer, 2021)



1



2

FIGURE 9

Changes in the atmosphere can be felt during the same day and are very dependent on current weather conditions and time of the visit to the location. Hilly grassland on the Mount Saint Mary was sketched in the early humid summer morning, after a night-time storm and then later, in the same hot afternoon. In the first sketch the student used soft strokes of grey colour reflecting the solemnity of the location (a). The path on the left is partly hidden, the trees blend with the surroundings. In the second drawing, the colours are intense, plant volumes cast darker shadows and the slope of the terrain is much clearer (b). This information can be incorporated into the design of the trail system to the hill.

(Drawing by Tim Gerdin, 2020).



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