

GEDDES' EUTOPIA: HIS PLACE IN PLANNING THOUGHT AND ACTION

By Graham King

Patrick Geddes (1857-1932) was an important pioneer of town planning whose writings have remarkable relevance today. Graham King reflects on the eclectic web of ideas that underpinned the prolific Scot's commitment to the centrality of Place.

After a long career in local government town planning, a number of unconnected events have served to rekindle my rather jaded sense of place: building a new porch for the house, the shock of working from home, and a stolen car. First, our house had no proper front entrance, just a ghastly all-glass door at the side. Today the result is a transformation, with stained glass, a stable door, a bench and a delightful view: a true threshold that invites you to linger as much as cross and seems to bring a smile to people's faces. (Note the intersection of time and space, how place is a pause, somewhere somewhen).

Working from home means having time to enjoy the village, to stop and talk on the walk to the post office, smell the blossom, hear the gossip and generally feel part of the place. The car? - stolen from outside the Buddhist meditation centre during a session on non-attachment to things! So it was back on my feet, 'legging' it to the fax. centre, waiting for the frequent minibus, re-ordering my priorities to a different rhythm, slowing down, letting go.

The moral of this tale for my sense of place was threefold - first we need an experiential awareness involving all our senses - the warm rain, the tang of a sea breeze, the cry of gulls (yes, and the occasional stink of car fumes too) - to know what feels good and what does not; second, villages have a far richer mosaic of social activity and visual delight than dormitory suburbs (again to do with scale and time measured by car speed); finally, walking is essential (or cycling), a question of space and time again. Richard Sennett confirms these conclusions when he writes how "the modern mobile individual has suffered a kind of tactile crisis: motion has helped desensitise the body" (1).

Put simply, consideration of the body has been left out in the design of cities, and unsurprisingly has been increasingly ignored in the education of town planners as planning has become more focused on the intellectual articulation of abstract issues. In this climate professional people develop professional blinkers that filter out the sunshine of discovery, and the sensual joy of being-in-the-world.

Yet we have had gurus who knew of these dangers: Christopher Alexander and his pattern language, Patrick Geddes the synoptic Scot, especially James Hillman psychologist extraordinaire. Geddes is especially my guy, a renaissance-style adventurer in the realm of practical ideas and stunning symbolism, whose teachings over 100 years ago have been watered down to a thin paste of positivist gruel despite his own warnings about technicians and futilitarians. His most recent biographer (2), after years of research, has also failed to understand his message and its relevance today, probably because of her empiricist blinkers too.

Geddes wisely counselled the comprehensive survey or diagnosis of cities prior to drawing up plans, recognition of regionalism, and, through his Outlook Tower in Edinburgh, the fostering of citizen participation. His synoptic approach, however, was misrepresented as the full rational-comprehensive-linear method, now on its last gasp as chaos theory and the uncertainties of the real world despatch the old order.

As an amateur philosopher I had been toying with existentialism as an antidote to positivism, and noticed the parallel ideas on intuition and intelligence in the thoughts of Henri Bergson (3) the French philosopher and Krishnamurti (4) the Indian sage. Much of this corresponded directly with Geddes' own thoughts and I later discovered that he had met and corresponded with Bergson in Paris and had encountered Indian philosophy in his work and travels there. From then on I dived deep into the Geddes treasury to discover the full richness of what he was saying and his multiplicity of sources.

His famous diagram of Folk-Work-Place and their combinations are well known as thinking tools. But rather than recount their now rather rigid framework, I will recast his main thoughts in a circular interactive way (see Figure One). Here there is no linear start or finish - each notion informs and supports each other. Together they profoundly challenge the orthodox

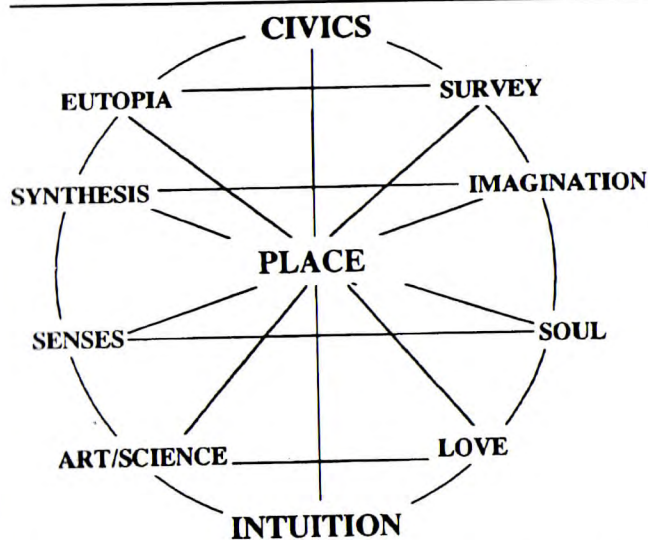


Figure One
A recasting of
Geddes' Folk-Work-
Place diagram.

Note: according to Geddes, "Eutopia lies in the city around us; it must be planned or realised, here or nowhere, by us as its citizens - each a citizen of both the actual and ideal city seen increasingly as one" (5).

scientific paradigm that he sensed developing all around him, now being so dramatically questioned. Any term can be placed or replaced at the centre, for in this way of thinking the centre is equally the circumference. All serve as prescriptions for the good city, for thriving successful places (5).

In a nutshell, he stood foursquare against the Cartesian divorce of object and subject, the suppression of subjectivity, and the growing prevalence of a narrow empiricism; he felt poesy draining from the world, as a disinterested objectivity held sway.

Although it has been said of Geddes that he was "open at every pore to the ideas that were circulating at the time", they were ideas that were to be ruthlessly denied by mainstream science. He was a syncretist *par excellence*, assimilating the ideas of Huxley, Le Play, Comte, Kropotkin and Bergson, and moving into human ecology, regional geography and town planning. As an evolutionary biologist he was equally at home in the sociology, psychology, economics and political science of his time (6). But as the century progressed general theories of his kind faded from the academic scene.

Suppose, though, he was with us today. Receptive at every pore, what would be his interests, and with whom would he be conversing? Clearly he would be leading the debate on sustainability; indeed Lewis Mumford's concept of 'organic planning' was based on Geddes' ideas of 'bio-technics'

and basically meant the same thing. Intellectually I'm sure, too, he would be forcefully engaged in many debates, from the 'new' economics (7) (involved with the proper value of scarce resources and the conservation of energy - a matter he was addressing in 1880), to chaos theory, and the new physics, with its emphasis on emergence (8), and, perhaps most excitingly of all, Stanislav Grof's (9) work in the realm of perinatal and transpersonal psychology, hailed by Richard Tarnas in his review of Western philosophy (10) as the most significant advance in human understanding, pregnant with possibility for planetary survival.

The potential of Information Technology, the World Wide Web and networking would have paralleled Geddes' concern for the web of life, which he would have seen as the modern equivalent of Indra's web from antiquity. Doubtless, throughout the ferment, he would weave a pattern of consequences for practical action in the urban realm, the rural areas and the oceans beyond. The planet would be his oyster, with, perhaps, place as his pearl. Agenda 21 would have been right up his street. Let us leave him with the last word on the vital vision of the 'fresh eye' of art and science: "*as this incipient union becomes realised, our discouragement and cynicism abate; before long our inhibitions and paralysis will pass away. Thus a new age, a new enthusiasm, a new enlightenment are already dawning: and with these the City Revivance is at hand*". Eutopia, the actual and ideal, as one. Perhaps his time is coming, perhaps not.

Afterword

Readers who are interested in this general field of holistic activity may wish to join The Academic Network by contacting Dr. James Stewart, tel./fax. 0191 - 284 9148.

References

- 1 Richard Sennett (1994) *Flesh and Stone* Faber and Faber, p. 256.
- 2 Helen Meller (1990) *Patrick Geddes* Routledge.
- 3 H. Wildon Carr (1912) *Henri Bergson: The Philosophy of Change* Jack.
- 4 J. Krishnamurti (1997) *The Awakening of Intelligence* Harper and Row.
- 5 Patrick Geddes (1949) *Cities in Evolution* Williams and Norgate.
- 6 Philip Boardman (1978) *The Worlds of Patrick Geddes* Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- 7 David Pearce *et al.* (1991) *Blueprint 2: Greening the World Economy* Earthscan.
- 8 James Gleick (1987) *Chaos: Making a New Science* Viking.
- 9 Stanislav Grof (1985) *Beyond the Brain State* University of New York.
- 10 Richard Tarnas (1996) *The Passion of the Western Mind* Pimlico.