Title
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Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4d5537n8

Journal
Places, 7(3)

ISSN
2164-7798

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Publication Date
1991-07-01

Peer reviewed
Sorting in Patrick Geddes’
Outlook Tower
In 1953, I was offered a small grant to spend three months at the Outlook Tower in Edinburgh, sorting the papers of Patrick Geddes (1854-1932, Scot, man, biologist, geographer, sociologist, regional and city planner, landscape gardener, professor and knight).

Students of city planning pick up a medley of facts about Geddes, one of the founders of our profession:

- He had synoptic vision (call it comprehensive overview plus insight).
- He believed in socio-evolution: Societies with "universal education" would improve their surroundings; these would upgrade society, which would then improve the surroundings, and so on.
- As a young man he had looked down from Kinnoul Hill upon his home town of Perth in the Tay Valley and cried "Eureka," or whatever, "Folk – Work – Place." Geddes insight on the hill was about the interdependence of city and region: The latter supplied resources, routes and character; the city provided markets, work and services.
- The Outlook Tower was a disused observatory with a camera obscura when Geddes took it over in the 1890s and used it as a center for developing and spreading his ideas.
- Geddes had started the tradition of summer schools in Britain in the 1880s. In the evenings, Geddes' scholars organized entertainments, dressing up and acting historical plays, and inspired him to write _The Masque of Learning._
- Geddes lectured world-wide, prepared improvement reports and plans for cities in India, designed a university (not built) for the Zionist Commission in Jerusalem and founded the Scots College at Montpelier,
France, where he spent his last years developing a more elaborate version of the Outlook Tower.

But this portrait has puzzling gaps and questions, upon which my sorting in the Outlook Tower would begin to shed light:
- How could Geddes ride so freely through academic disciplines, as though they were public property?
- I was in planning because towns are where most of us live, decent environments are a civilised idea and the countryside needed protection. But what inspired Geddes?
- What inspired the remarkable people who supported Geddes in his lifetime and those, later in Britain, who were a force in making town planning a public trust?

- Why did Geddes use the Survey Analysis Plan as a formula for city planning, which makes the process sound quick and easy when it is complex, difficult and time consuming?
- Planners in 1953 had to work for consensus, for example, through interdisciplinary teams comprising local administrators, committee members, powerful developers, the public and civil servants.
- What was the future role of the Outlook Tower?
- Was Geddes' notion about the interdependence of city and region still valid, considering the proliferation of cheap imports and the now, light, footloose industries?
St. John's church farther down the street. The Outlook Tower is a six- and seven-story building; the crenellat-ed parapet roof has projecting corner turrets and a domed octagonal tower on top. The first four floors had been part of two seventeenth-century town houses on narrow lots. The upper floors and the tower were added in the mid-nineteenth century when the town houses were made into an observatory.

Waiting at the door when I arrived was Eric Stevenson, a towering, fair-haired man, architect and senior planner at the Scottish Office. He was administering the Forbes Trust grants for Lady Whiston, my sponsor. I followed Stevenson up steep stone stairs to the Tower's battlements, from which one could see Edinburgh spreading from the Pentland Hills north, over crags, troughs, valleys and the coastal plain to the Firth of Forth, a wildly romantic site.

The camera room in the octagon under the dome had a large, round table that was slightly dished in the center and occupied most of the room. Stevenson explained that a helicopter view of the city and the region could be projected onto the table and rotated; the Tower had been used by several groups during the recent Edinburgh Festival and the camera obscura had been very popular. He did not give a demonstration.

I had expected the Tower would be a workshop like Henry Ford's bicycle shed or Madame Curie's laboratory, but not much evidence remained from the Goddes era except the names of the large space on each floor; Edinburgh Room at the top, the World at the bottom. The only visible reminders of a Festival exhibition that had been in the Edinburgh room were browned photographs and engravings on the walls. A small side room had
been used during the Festival as a stained glass artist's studio; tall, dark cupboards obscured the light and large glass pieces, difficult to move. This room had the air of a church vestry, an identity, in comparison to all the other spaces, except for a so-called kitchen (off what had been the Festival tea-room) that had a gas stove and a hill both in it.

Some of the Festival groups seemed to have left in a hurry, but the place was clean. Floors were covered with linoleum, the rough walls and ceilings with thin paper. The Scotland Room (beneath the Edinburgh Room) had a true-to-scale map of the country painted on the floor. Next below, the English Speaking Countries and the British Empire room was filled with boxes of papers and books on shelves. My workroom.

Stevenson gave me his office telephone number (the Tower had no phone) and some bulky keys, apologized for rushing off, shook hands and left. He had not explained what "sorting" meant.

I went over the premises again. I checked the locks on basement doors and windows, and the gas-taps, cleaned up in the makeshift kitchen (noting a mousetrap in a corner) and examined the views from my workroom window. The front one looked into a stone canyon, Castlehill; the side one looked across Ramsay Lane, over a flat roof that might have been a covered reservoir and part Ramsay Garden (a block of apartments built as a Goddess initiative) to the parade ground and the castle. There was no desktop working space except a small desk, and there were no tables. I collected chairs from other floors and arranged them around the desk in a half circle, decided to work English hours (one o'clock lunch), opened the first box and dropped into the nineteenth century.

**Sorting**

The jumble of papers in the box was of all kinds, all sizes, bound, loose, written, typed, printed; magazines, faded photographs, books. First I took out...
the regional and city planning items, surveys, reports, diagrams, plans for cities in several countries; material from the second traveling International Town Planning Exhibition (the first was sunk by enemy action in World War I in the Indian Ocean); reprints of Geddes' articles in professional journals; his book, *The Evolution of Cities*, and other books in the natural sciences, written with J. Arthur Thomson.

Then the art section. Arts and Crafts Movement, Art Nouveau, the Celtic Revival; old Gaelic songs collected from the Highlands and Island by Mrs. Kennedy Fraser; copies of *The Evergreen*, a prose and poetry quarterly, on thick, rough paper, published by Geddes and colleagues — there were only four numbers. Pictures of Pre-Raphaelite women and Ronnie Mackintosh's School of Art, and his Tearooms in Glasgow.

Discovery! If the formula for a synoptic view of a city is FOLK — WORK — PLACE, then WORK means all activities, including the arts and crafts. The full formula is then: FOLK ≠ ACTIVITIES ≠ PLACE ≠ CULTURE, or CIVILIZATION.

How to sort the nineteenth century philosophers? A natural dividing line was the 1838-39 intellectual earthquake, when Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace together read their theories of the evolution of species (independently conceived) before the Linnaean Society in London, then published them. (Geddes was 23.) The great Germans who founded modern geography — Immanuel Kant, von Humboldt and his student Carl Ritter — had finished their work before the earthquake. And by that time Auguste Comte (a name occurring often in the Tower — as a young man Comte had been secretary to the utopian Claude Henri de Rouvroy, Comte de St. Simon) already had established a systematic social science, calling it sociology. He held that social phenomena can be scientifically described and that social science should be used in guiding sound social planning.

So by the time Darwin and Wallace's theories were published, the ground had been prepared for those who followed: the Austrian René Durkheim; the Frenchman Le Play.

**EVERGREEN**

A NORTHERN SEASONAL

1895

PUBLISHED IN THE LAWNSMARKET OF EDINBURGH BY PATRICK GEDDES AND COLLEAGUES AND IN LONDON BY T. FISHER UNWIN

Demolins and Vital de la Blache; Elbére Reclus, a Belgian trained in Germany; and in England John Stuart Mill, John Ruskin, the Fabians and socialists; and Karl Marx. The air, as Linnaeus had said about insect hunters (a century ago in Latin), was full of talk. The earthquake had uncovered exciting new territory, which the philosophers were preparing to map and stake out.

Herbert Spencer's name was conspicuous among the papers, and difficult to catalogue. He treated all sciences as common ground, anticipated Darwin's theory of evolution and coined the saying "survival of the fittest." Then Prince Kropotkin, a

geographer, revolutionary, veteran of a Consular regiment in Siberia and also a conservationist! Kropotkin, from his observations of mutual aid among higher animals, held that the Sociological Darwinists' justification of human greed, based on survival of the fittest, was wrong.

The road to the Ideal City did not run straight through the social sciences, apparently; it looped through natural science. For us working in 1953 in the planning department of a large city, nature impinged only during the week as parks and landscape, greenhouses far out, weather so foul we could not go on survey and biology at evening classes. The region, where you walked on weekends, was someone else's responsibility.

I have assumed that Geddes was Professor of Botany at Dundee for pragmatic reasons, but this sighted view changed at the Outlook Tower. It seemed that Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-95) was the key to the question of what inspired Geddes. Huxley was a natural scientist, philosopher and educator who believed in educating the whole individual. Age 35 when *The Origin of Species* was published, he defended it publicly against dissenting scientists and churchmen, opposed Victorians who quoted "survival of the fittest" to justify greed and worked to apply Darwin's theory in the new science, which the German Ernst Haeckel had named "Ecology" in 1869.

As a first-year student, Geddes had abandoned botany in Edinburgh after one week and gone to unusual lengths to join Huxley's five-month intensive course in natural science at the Royal School of Mines in London; he was inspired and convinced by Huxley.2 It seems possible that Geddes built his theory of socio-evolution on the
ecological principle of progression, which would have been known to him and to Huxley before it became authorized writ. This principle holds that certain plants and animals live together in communities in certain places (children know which they are and where to find them); in time, these communities change (pioneer plants on cleared forests, for instance, give way to more mature species, then scrub, then trees); and at each stage, the sitting tenants improve conditions for their successors. This principle, combined with the possibilities suggested in the Theory of Evolution (and Geddes’ belief in universal education as a factor in social evolution) could explain Geddes’ optimism and his ability to persuade others to join him in the drive toward Ideal Cities.

But the prospects for building Ideal Cities were not encouraging. In Britain Geddes had little or no official support; the public did not assume responsibility for planning cities until 1947. In Geddes’ time, a newly formed local government network had barely managed to take over the public workhouses, the sewers and the cleaning of town streets.

Reform work meant private means. Octavia Hill, in her efforts to improve the miserable conditions of the working classes, was being encouraged and partly financed by Ruskin, Cadbury and Lever; other enlightened industrialists had built civilized housing for their workers, who then did better work. Ebenezer Howard, in his spare time, was devising principles for garden cities which would be built on green sites, privately financed.

Geddes, a prophet, preacher, planning consultant and builder with entire old towns and cities as his subject, was supported by a few life-long friends, a changing band of young enthusiasts and convinced local philanthropists. He kept clear of political and religious groups. He joined only those voluntary organizations that he could lead and when they ceased to attract support, or the members split on basic issues, he moved on — the choice of routes to socio-evolution was wide. His aims were never quite clear to others because his vision was continuously evolving as he synthesized ideas from observations and experiences, in light of philosophical theories appearing on both sides of the Atlantic. It was Geddes’ vision and his drive that attracted and held his supporters.

The Improvements

Interruption. At one o’clock every day, the cattle gun fired and shook the windows. Edinburghers checked their watches, and I went out to enjoy the Old Town and check on the Improvements. Geddes had returned to Scotland in the 1890s to be botany demonstrator in Edinburgh and teacher in natural history in the School of Medicine. The university was in the Old Town, which was an overcrowded, overbuilt and unsanitary place: shabby, congested, dirty and draughty, with fine fifteenth- to eighteenth-century buildings combining Scottish engineering skills and French flair.

The Old Town had been built originally so that Scottish nobles could live near the court and its French connections. From the main axis along the back of the ridge, long thin lot lines at right angles, like a fringe, ran down the slope; these narrow sites were permanent under Scots law whereby land was not sold to developers but leased in perpetuity at a fixed rent with binding conditions. As a result, the aristocrats’ houses along the Royal Mile were built very tall and deep and as the population grew, courts appeared on the backlands — dark six-story tenements with three extra stories on the lower slopes.

Around 1800, wealthy families began moving across the Nor’ Loch to the New Town, leaving the historic core to rot. By the time Geddes returned, the Town Council had passed an Improvement Act and divided the old town into Improvement Areas. Geddes and his new wife, Anna Morton, both already involved in the Improvement cause, created a sensation by settling in an apartment in a slum tenement in James Court. They were given the Lawnmarket Area to improve, in a remarkably loose arrangement, apparently unfinanced. They restored their apartment and with the help of friends and eager students, went on to buy and restore others in the building and then other tenements, which became halls of residence for university students. Meanwhile, Geddes undertook the building of Ramsay Gardens, a highly romantic apartment group alongside the Castle Esplanade, intended as a town and gown hall of residence and flats.

Keele

Stevenson had told me there was material in other places where Geddes had worked. The aim was to bring as much of it as possible into the Tower. Records from Geddes’ association with the British Sociological Society had been moved from London during World War II to the home of the retired secretary in the Midlands, and they were being passed on to the University of Keele. Stevenson asked me to visit these two places.

I went down to the Midlands, first to the small market town of Ledbury
and the home of Alexander Farquharson, who had worked with Giddens and Brimford in London for years as secretary of the Sociology Society. Mrs. Farquharson showed me a tea chest with about 10 cubic feet of loose papers in it that had been collected from one of their London buildings during World War II, I think she said after it had been bombed. The Farquharsons had several similar chests and were sorting and passing the papers on to the university; some had already gone but the work was slow.

At Keckle's library I showed me, in a dark passage, a row of tea chests with the familiar mix-up of papers. I asked how they were going to catalogue them and she said they were waiting for someone to be appointed to do the work. It might take a year or more.

The Millennium trip settled two queries. First, the curious response of social scientists when asked for advice. For example, architects working under pressure on a public housing scheme ask scientists whether main doors should be placed to face across a street or be staggered to avoid housewives confronting each other. One scientist says, "We haven't done our research on that one yet. Sorry." Another says the same and goes on to give all the advice she can from her experience.

British sociologists apparently were divided between parties, who saw society as research material (they quoted Comte, one of the nineteenth-century founders of the discipline, who wrote, "social phenomena can be sci-
critically observed and reduced to law?) and those who thought "social science should be used in improving the human condition" (also quoting Comte). Like the latter, Geddes put ahead of party and used his experience, fonte de mine.

The second point was the role of an Outlook Tower. At Keene, Geddes would be catalogued as a sociologist; in the university records at St. Andrews and Edinburgh and at the Roseoff Marine Station, he would be considered a biologist. In our profession, he was a regional and city planner. The Synthesizer was being taken apart. An outlook tower is a symbol of synthesis.

Boys

Arriving in Edinburgh off the night train, sky shining, wind fresh, it was wonderful to be back! I took a flag out of the theatrelit chest and out onto the battlements and handed it up. A blast sent it ratting and slapping across the street, over the roofs, half-way to St. John's steeply before I could haul it back. Celebration postponed.

An English friend who was subsidizing my grant with home comforts had four boys. Would they like to visit the tower to see the camera obscura? They came, ate rolls with soft drinks, climbed to the battlements, checked the view and went into the octagon. Working the camera obscura was more or less like milking a cow in a cinema. The boys were surprised to see on the table cards scuttling along Princes Street, the castle rock with the city wrapped around it, grey terraces stretching to the Forth, the Fife mountains beyond, more terraces rotating to Arthur's Seat and Calton Hill. After identifying their school they were eager to explore the tower.

An acquaintance who had been passing on Castellhill at the time said afterwards she thought school classes were rehearsing historical plays: Campbells trouncing McDonalds, Scots trouncing English, Members of the government fighting the opposition on the floor of the House, rich fighting poor, private interests fighting public, nature fighting the unnatural, giant firms fighting planners... The one o'clock cannon exploded, the tumult stopped, boys tore downstairs, shook hands, thanked me for a super time and vanished. For boys, as for George Bernard Shaw, every drama must present a conflict; society and the city are a battleground, naturally.

By degrees, the British public had been making itself more responsible for city planning. Legislative changes in 1947 gave local authorities control over construction and over major changes in the use of (for the first time) all land in the country, except war department land and farms and forests remaining intact. (Property owners who lost value as a result could claim compensation up to a set date.)

But for city hall to exercise its power responsibly, the public must be fully informed, using Geddes' terms, about the folk, place and work (activities) that together equal culture. Local government departments have in their files comprehensive information — surveys — of their area made by qualified teams for staff and elected members to use. For practical reasons, this mass of documents is not generally available to the public.

At the Outlook Tower, the Geddes group had made its own place where citizens could study themselves and their culture in detail. At times it is still that kind of place, when Edinburgians fill it with their festival, when boys find their school with the camera obscura. The work of researching and presenting survey material was then and is now a learning process.
The public today could make its own surveys - children, college students, voluntary societies and retired groups could do the work with professional guidance. The Outlook Tower, then, was and should be a place for working on data, for filming and exhibiting it for debate and discussion. It needs meeting rooms and a cafe.

Meanwhile at city hall today the modern departments are analysing and correlating their survey data - diagnosing problems, shortages, injustices, post failures, needs, setting trends, potentials and resources unwise, then hummering out, coordinating policies and plans for the city and its people for the next few years. The mechanisms whereby citizens in a democracy are systematically involved in this hammering process are not yet worked out. When they are, the words "outlook tower" in a city might symbolize the public's place in that process.

Mice

The sorting went on and overnight the temperature dropped to three overcoats colder in the Tower. I thought I must stop work or get permission to install some kind of heating. Meanwhile, a ragged hole had appeared in the thin paper covering the workroom ceiling, as though it had been hit by a tall lance. I searched the building, nothing was out of place. Then a heater arrived and it worked.

I went back to sorting and after some time had an eerie feeling I was not alone. At a respectful distance in the half-circle of warmth on the floor sat two mice. They were cold and hungry, and probably had come into the Tower to scavange crumbs. They were trying to eat old paste on the ceiling paper when one fell through.

The mice and I were the only living creatures in this place. We were relatives from way back - family, more or less. Paper-eating mice are a problem and I was responsible for the Geddes papers, but murder was not in my contract. I could trap them live and ask the Edinburgh zoo (early landscaping by Geddes' daughter, Lady Mears) to keep them. The zoologists there did not study house mice.

Two years later, as a planner in the Scottish office, I would have telephoned the Edinburgh Nature Conservancy down the street about the mice. A scientist would have said, I think, almost always did) "We haven't done research on that one yet," and go on to make practical, ecologically sound suggestions. It was not their job to give civil servants informal advice, but they were responsible people.

Geddes might have found a role for the mice in the same spirit as he recognized and promoted the street sweepers in India - he gave them a place in the civic street processions and plots of land on which in rotation they composted street sweepings and grew vegetables.

House mice suggest the connection between zoologists and sociologists: Society is not exempt from natural laws; our town is a product of raw materials - the stones in the streets, our food, our energy, brains and brawn.

Cities and regions are still interdependent even though the scale has changed; our region may be the planet and our cities, following Geddes, may be Madras, Jerusalem, or New York. We are working, heaven help us, on the science of civilization.

The Outlook Tower may be a metaphor for intellectual co-operation, or it may be a center set up by the people of a city/region for learning, teaching and debating, with information lines to all other institutions in the area but independent - a center for exchanging ideas and intentions about the community, the place and the future, so that elected representatives have a clearer idea of what they represent. An Outlook Tower, you might say, is another step on the way to improving the design of democracy.

Notes

1. "The idea was to play, an engineer, economist and sociologist, who coined the saying "Low Rural Yonder". Geddes adapted it in his serial-type thinking devices and in his lectures on, depending on the audience, "Place, Work, Folk", "Environment: Function: Organism", or "Geography: Economics: Anthropology."

2. After leaving London, Geddes continued research in the natural sciences. He wrote and lectured on biology throughout his life and with J. Arthur Thomson produced several books: The first, The Evolution of Man, earned a sensation in 1889; the last, Life: Outlines of General Biology, was published in 1913.