

Sir Patrick Geddes Commemorative Lecture given at Edinburgh on 1 October 2004

Sustainable Development Past and Present

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I feel deeply honoured to have been invited by the Royal Town Planning Institute and Saltire Society to give the first Patrick Geddes Commemorative Lecture on the 150th Anniversary of his birth. Unbeknownst to those rash enough to extend this invitation to me, I have for a long time been a great admirer of Patrick Geddes, and believe him to be one of the most important of those early pioneers of what we now know as sustainable development.

I discovered his work by chance, more than ten years ago, when running a course at Schumacher College on the history of green ideas. This has been an abiding obsession of mine, in the face of the resolutely ahistorical stance adopted by most people active in the Green Movement today. You might assume, listening to today's environmental orthodoxy, that its basic ideas and principles emerged freshly-minted, out of the weird and wonderful world of the late 1960s. Nothing could be further from the truth, and tracking the lineage of those ideas back into some very dim and distant times serves both to remind people of that thin green thread that has weathered so many cultural and political shifts, and to lend ideological and philosophical depth to the campaigns that preoccupy contemporary green activists.

One star in my galaxy at Schumacher College was Lewis Mumford (a great American scholar, sociologist, urbanist and planner), and one star in Mumford's historical galaxy was Patrick Geddes. There was a strange and ultimately unrewarding relationship, in that an ageing Patrick Geddes was too keen to impose on a youthful Lewis Mumford all the burdens of discipleship in a way that Lewis Mumford found literally unbearable. But throughout his life, Mumford acknowledged the inspirational impact and quality of Patrick Geddes, describing him on one occasion as a man who "conveyed what it is to be fully alive, alive in every pore, at every moment, in every dimension," and comparing him on another occasion as a "systematic thinker comparable to Leibnitz, Aristotle or Pythagoras".

I subsequently came across an extraordinary book edited by Frank Novak called "Lewis Mumford and Patrick Geddes: The Correspondence", which provides a

compelling account of this lopsided relationship conducted almost entirely through correspondence over seventeen years. Mumford was quick to recognise the principal sources of inspiration for Patrick Geddes's work, particularly Thomas Huxley, Frederic le Play, Peter Kropotkin and Ernst Häckel (whose "Ökologie", published in 1869, is seen by many as the first major ecological text). In "Cities of Tomorrow", Sir Peter Hall comments on the way in which Mumford built so successfully on this body of work, using it to underpin his own regional planning association in America – and if you want to know where the contemporary notion of bio-regionalism came from, look no further than the work of Mumford and Geddes.

Although it's true that a lot of Geddes's writing is opaque, he was a dab hand at the odd sustainable development soundbite! I much enjoy pointing out to sustainable development activists that one of their favourite catch phrases, "Think Global, Act Local", did not emerge from that crucible of catchphrases, the 1992 Earth Summit, but rather from Patrick Geddes's "Cities in Evolution" in 1915! Beyond that, he was constantly seeking to provide snappy summaries of his ideas – often in the form of verbal troikas! His educational troika, "Head, Heart and Hand", remains one of the best known of these, and I shall be touching on that at the end of my Lecture, just as I shall be returning to his concept of "Place, Work, Folk".

My own favourite, however, lies in his three Ss: Sympathy (for all people and for the natural world); Synthesis (of the different parts of a system); and Synergy (the combined, cooperative actions of people working together to make their place a better place). It's clear that Geddes would have been a great champion of today's "stakeholder approach" to getting things sorted out, let alone of the "Planning for Real" movement!

Enough history! Here we are now in 2004, giving new voice to many of those earlier insights, picked up and amplified through the increasingly influential concept of sustainable development. I must of course declare a vested interest here: as Chairman of the Sustainable Development Commission it is my job to extol both the intellectual authority and the convening power of sustainable development, and to go on pointing out to those in politics still flailing around to find a genuinely "big idea" to match the massive challenges of the 21st Century, that it's already right there under their noses - and it's called sustainable development.

As we know, some of those challenges are environmental – climate change, overfishing, water shortages, deforestation and so on. Some are social – security issues, poverty, growing wealth disparities and so on. And some are economic. But what is more important than any one of those challenges in its own right is the degree to which its impacts on all the others. It's for that reason that the main principle used by the Sustainable Development Commission is "putting sustainable development at the centre":

"Sustainable development should be the organizing principle of all democratic societies, underpinning all other goals, policies and processes. It provides a framework for integrating economic, social and environmental concerns over time, not through crude trade-offs, but through the pursuit of mutually reinforcing benefits. It promotes good governance, healthy living, innovation, life-long learning and all forms of economic growth which secure the natural capital upon which we depend. It reinforces social harmony and seeks to secure each individual's prospects of leading a fulfilling life."

With that in mind, I sometimes despair when I hear of politicians talking about "joined-up politics". Joined-up politics really isn't a question of improved cross-departmental cooperation in policy-making, but of a completely different way of looking at what we now have to do to build a secure, equitable and sustainable future for human kind.

That's not a prospect available to us today with any of the "business-as-usual" models of progress advocated by mainstream politicians. The degree of institutionalised denial remains astonishing. To give but one example, it's all but impossible to discuss the blindingly obvious reality that the growth in human numbers between 1950 (when our population was around 3 billion), 2000 (around 6 billion), and 2050 (likely to be around 9 billion) is probably the single most important reality that we have to take stock of in coping with today's interlocking crises. Yet such an assertion is so politically incorrect that I'm not even sure I should be uttering it in my capacity as Chairman of the Sustainable Development Commission!

But let's get a little bit more logical about this. With climate change, for instance. After twenty years of painstaking research and sophisticated computer modelling, mediated for the most part through the impeccable authority of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, we now know that climate change is a demonstrable

phenomenon, in our midst right now, and threatening increasingly severe disruptions in the future. Even the benighted administration of George Bush would now appear to have accepted that reality.

We've heard over the last few weeks that Russia now intends to ratify the Kyoto Protocol - one of the best bits of climate change news for a very long time! But just put the vexed politics of the Kyoto Protocol as it is now to one side for a moment: as of 2005, all governments will be required to start negotiating what happens after the first "commitment period", namely 2012. How are all nations (including the United States, China, India and so on) going to set about achieving what the scientists now tell us is absolutely necessary: that to avoid rapidly accelerating or "dangerous" climate change, we will have to restrict temperature increases in this century to below 2°C, which in turn means we will have to restrict increases in concentrations of CO₂ to below 450ppm (parts per million). Concentrations are currently at around 370ppm, and rising by about 2ppm every year – which will give you some sense of the challenge to hand!

The most serious policy contender for this next phase of climate change diplomacy goes by the name of "contract and converge" - requiring the nations of the rich world dramatically to contract their emissions of greenhouse gases to allow nations of the poor world to grow their economies in part through an inevitable increase in the consumption of fossil fuels. At some stage, (still to be defined, but a lot closer than a lot of politicians imagine), we must then move towards a situation where every human being, (be they in Boston, Bognor Regis or Beijing) has an equal allocation of the atmosphere's net capacity to absorb CO₂. That's the convergence bit.

You don't have to be a mathematical genius to realise that it's going to be a lot harder to get that sorted out with 9 billion people claiming an equal share of this particular finite resource than it would be with 6 billion – let alone 3 billion (which is where human numbers were just fifty years ago). All those who continue to think that we are somehow immune from the operations of the Laws of Nature are as sorely deluded today as they have been at any other point in history. As Patrick Geddes himself once put it: "what was decided among the prehistoric Protozoa cannot be annulled by Act of Parliament". For Geddes, by contrast with today's "wise leaders", was firmly of the opinion that humankind should indeed be following the same core rules of nature as other organisms do. The relationships may be different, the complexity that much greater, but the goal is the same. I can't help but think that he

would approve of the Sustainable Development Commission's second main Principle:

"We are and always will be part of Nature, embedded in the natural world, and totally dependent for our own economic and social wellbeing on the resources and systems that sustain life on Earth. These systems have limits, which we breach at our peril. All economic activity must be constrained within those limits. We have an inescapable moral responsibility to pass on to future generations a healthy and diverse environment, and critical natural capital unimpaired by economic development. Even as we learn to manage our use of the natural world more efficiently, so we must affirm these individual beliefs and belief systems which revere nature for its intrinsic value, regardless of its economic and aesthetic value to human kind."

It is the speed with which this is all happening that understandably leaves today's politicians floundering. We're finding it incredibly difficult to get a proper sense of perspective on this – which is where planning comes into the frame! For all sorts of reasons, planners now find themselves on the front line of delivering sustainable development for real people in real life situations. And I guess my principal message this evening is to suggest that there is now a unique opportunity to bring about the most significant reform in the Scottish planning system for a very long time to help improve performance against that lofty mission.

As I understand it, a new Planning Bill is anticipated in the next Parliamentary Session. We very much hope that the Scottish Parliament will seize that opportunity to define a formal purpose for planning – namely, "to deliver sustainable development". Such a purpose was originally supported by Lord Falconer as the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill was under consideration in Whitehall, but by the time Parliamentary Counsel had had its way, not only did this purpose disappear, but the sustainable development duty which has now been laid on all plan-making bodies in England and Wales had somehow slipped to Clause 38! Great that it's there at all (and we are now hoping that the new Policy Planning Statement 1 (due out in the near future), will provide the clarity of guidance about planning for sustainable development that has been so lacking in the past), but it would have been so much better if he'd stuck to his original guns.

In that respect, there is now a gathering consensus about what “planning for sustainability” means in practice. In broad terms, it should:

- focus on specific sustainable outcomes and improving quality of life
- promote the highest quality development and most beneficial land use in the most appropriate locations at the right time
- prevent inappropriate development
- ensure prudent use of natural resources
- integrate social, economic and environmental benefits – win-win outcomes
- provide a longer term perspective
- protect critical natural capital; avoid, or if not possible, minimise environmental damage
- include new techniques for assessing and calculating the longer term impacts of development
- be better resourced, with better training for planners and local councillors
- be based on a strong national framework

This year, the Scottish Executive published its own National Planning Framework – a welcome first step. In terms of sustainable development, the Framework says a lot of the right things, but is somewhat limited in scope and was subject to a very late and very limited form of Strategic Environmental Assessment. In addition, Scottish Planning Policy 1 (“The Planning System”) specifically states that planning should encourage sustainable development in all sorts of different ways.

Perhaps the single most important thing emerging from all of this is that planning for sustainable development is not about trade-off but about integration – putting extra effort into solutions that deliver win-win outcomes, and not accepting mediocre

schemes as “good enough”. Trade-off process is common in the lexicon of planners, but it is only OK so long as it means that all issues have been properly and robustly assessed, that they are based on as full an understanding as possible, that all alternative solutions have been explored first, and that the best location and development option has been chosen. If, on the other hand, trade-off means arriving at the solution that does least harm to each interest, then it is not acceptable and should be resisted.

Planners therefore need to be able to take time to negotiate and improve schemes - go the extra mile – with all the consequent problems that this raises in terms of meeting government determination deadlines. They might in this respect be mindful of something that Patrick Geddes stressed throughout his life: “planning requires long and patient study. The work cannot be done in the office with ruler and parallels, for the plan must be sketched out on the spot, after wearying hours of perambulation”.

And isn't that still one of the key elements in a fairer planning process? In a speech at the Sustainable Communities Conference on September 3rd this year, Margaret Curran (then the Minister for Communities) picked up on the Geddes axiom of “Place, Work, Folk” and added a fourth item - namely, fairness. She went on to say :

“We know that for regeneration to work in the long term – for it to be sustainable – then the local community has to be at the heart of the process. This is because we can't expect local people to have full ownership of regeneration issues if they haven't been involved in them from the outset. And we may waste valuable time and resources - and risk setting up ineffective schemes – if we don't make sure we are focussing on the true priorities for local people. A key part of environmental justices is making sure that everyone – not just the “usual suspects”, or the privileged few – has the chance to influence decisions that affect their day to day lives.”

The Sustainable Development Commission wholly concurs with that vision. But at the moment, as you know, applicants for planning permission have a right of appeal if their application is refused under the current planning system. In contrast, there are very limited rights of challenge for individuals, communities or NGOs if a development is approved. Is this fair? Many developments are granted consent despite being contrary to the Development Plan. Is this fair? And those who are

least able to represent their own interest as are most likely to suffer from unwanted developments. Again, is this fair?

What we need is a modernised planning system that ensures public engagement throughout the process – sustainable development depends upon participation and trust, by all parties, on a level playing field. In order to deliver this, the Commission believes that the introduction of a widened Right of Appeal is essential as part of the overall programme of modernising the planning system.

I appreciate this is a controversial recommendation – as evidenced by the response to it from the CBI in Scotland: “If Jonathon Porritt thinks this is such a good idea, why has it been dropped in England? Scotland is not a guinea pig for him to experiment upon.” I hate to put the CBI’s rather delicate little nose even further out of joint, but the Commission, as a UK-wide body, must necessarily pursue policies consistently across the whole of the UK. We strongly advocated the adoption of Third Party Rights of Appeal during the passage of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill, but can hardly be blamed for the uninspiringly cautious decisions of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. Our hope is that Scottish Ministers will be more far-sighted than their Whitehall equivalents, and more resistant to the special pleading of the likes of the CBI.

I also appreciate that this is not the view of our hosts for this evening, the Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland. I much enjoyed reading its response to the “Widening the Right of Appeal” consultation, and was pleased to see just how much we had in common on this issue: that the planning system in Scotland is not working well; that there is a crucial need to restore public confidence; that there is a need for more public participation during development plan preparations; that development plans must be more up to date, and so on. However, its specific proposal (recommending a Public Right of Review) is one with which we would not concur, as it seems to us not to pass Margaret Curran’s own understanding of fairness in community involvement.

Based on that, I have one specific idea for the Scottish Executive: why not apply the “Patrick Geddes test “ to this particularly vexed question? If Patrick Geddes were able, from the grave, as it were, to contribute a rather late submission to the ‘Widening the Right of Appeal’ consultation, how do you think it would read? To take that a little bit further, perhaps the Patrick Geddes Memorial Trust, as part and parcel

of its admirable work to restore the work of Patrick Geddes to its rightful place, might launch a competition for the best “in his own words” submission to the consultation, drawing on his lifetime’s work and key ideas.

Though I would not in any way claim to be a Geddes scholar, I can’t honestly imagine how he wouldn’t be strongly in favour of some kind of third party rights of appeal. Otherwise, what does this mean: “Town planning is not merely place-planning, nor even work-planning. If it is to be successful, it must be folk-planning.”? To use such a quote, is, of course, a little unfair. (Almost as unfair as the wonderfully robust debate currently raging in the United States as people seek to answer the deceptively simple question: “would Jesus drive a Sports Utility Vehicle if he came back to Earth?”). But from my perspective, it’s not much good labelling someone as “the founding father of modern town-planning” if one doesn’t use the insights and wisdom of the man as a living body of work rather than a fossilised intellectual curiosity.

And in that spirit, let us try to imagine what Patrick Geddes might have said on today’s highly controversial debate about wind power. Here again, I have to admit that I’m a little biased, not only in believing that wind power is capable of making a critical and substantial contribution to our overall energy needs (which is now very much part of orthodox government thinking), but also in perceiving wind turbines to be objects of compelling physical beauty, capable of enhancing as many landscapes as they may impair. (Not such an orthodox view!)

The Sustainable Development Commission is currently undertaking a new piece of work to review the current range of arguments for and against, to expose them (on both sides) to some kind of “truth test”, and to come down hard on those guilty of peddling misperceptions or deliberately mendacious propaganda (on both sides), and to make some recommendations to Whitehall, the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly Government as to ways in which the quality of this debate might be improved.

So here’s the Patrick Geddes test on this one: would he have been putting in a planning application to erect a number of mini-turbines alongside the Camera Obscura on the top of the Outlook Tower - which, as I’m sure you know, Geddes himself once described as “the world’s first sociological laboratory”!

To answer that question, we need to revisit Patrick Geddes's forerunner definition of sustainable development as "Place, Work, Folk". He first borrowed this from Frederic le Play, whose work he discovered when he was in Paris in the 1870s, but elaborated it throughout his lifetime in such a way that it became the philosophical touchstone on which so much of his work is based. What's of particular interest today is the way "Place, Work, Folk" matches up with our own rather emaciated notion of the Triple Bottom Line: Environment, Economy, Society. "Place", by contrast, is such a nuanced and empathetic way of talking about the environment, not least because it assumes humankind to be an embedded part of the environment rather than as a species standing apart from the environment – as in that classically dualist form of words "humankind and the rest of the environment".

Geddes was a systematically holistic thinker, believing that one can only make sense of things by seeing them as parts of a bigger system. As regards the concept of "Place", he thought in terms of what might be described as "nested layers", with each spatial layer critical in its own right, but only properly comprehensible (and therefore "plannable", as it were) by reference to those other spatial layers nested in it or in which it was nested. As you know, this was taken fairly literally in his layout for the Outlook tower, where visitors were required to start at the top, with the Camera Obscura allowing for a survey of the surrounding area, and then work down from displays about Edinburgh on the fifth floor, Scotland on the fourth floor, Great Britain on the Third floor, Europe on the second, and the world on the first.

Thinking of this in context of the wind power debate, I couldn't help but speculate how useful it would be to be able to take the different protagonists involved in any planning dispute to a latter day equivalent of the Outlook Tower. Such a visit would encourage defenders of their local landscape (let alone the self-styled "Country Guardians", who often have no local links with prospective wind farm sites, but campaign as if they'd lived there all their lives!) to see their community and landscape as part of a much wider system - a system which is now deeply imperilled by the threat of climate change. From that perspective, it's just not acceptable to say "no" to fossil fuels, "no" to nuclear, and "no" again, to wind power and other renewables!

By the same token, a visit to the Outlook Tower might encourage some wind developers to see their commercial priorities from inside the "nested space" of the local community affected by their developments, to reach out to those communities,

and engage more proactively with them to minimise negative impacts and maximise local benefits.

And it might encourage the planners involved in any wind farm application not to withdraw into the safe but sterile embrace of what the relevant planning guidance does or doesn't say, but to embrace their role as solution-brokers, mediators, or "synthesists", as Geddes would have described them.

And that of course puts planners right back in the hot seat – which from my perspective, is exactly where planners should want to be! For if we know one thing for certain about Patrick Geddes, it is this: that if we applied the Patrick Geddes test to the whole question of the state of planning and the planning profession today, one can't help but conclude that he would be a disappointed man. Indeed, there are some who have argued that there is now so little of the radicalism and holistic thinking of Patrick Geddes left in contemporary planning practice as to cause the father of modern town-planning to disown it all together. One such critic, Michael Small, puts it as follows:

"Geddes has been hijacked by the planning fraternity, who have, in preserving his name from oblivion, also narrowed it into a space in which it cannot breathe. Gone is the pioneering ecology, the arguments for self-management, mutual aid and decentralisation, and in its place an insipid and technocratic paternalism. The glaring contradiction between Geddes's vision and the crimes that have been done by planners, who still claim Geddes is their inspiration, is breathtaking".

That, I suspect, would be considered by most people in this audience to be an excessively harsh viewpoint. But others would certainly concur with a less inflammatory viewpoint that one of the reasons why the standing and the reputation of the planning profession as a whole would appear to have become somewhat shrunken is that it has lost that inspirational purpose that drove Patrick Geddes throughout his life.

Tonight is certainly not the kind of occasion to try and do justice to such a complicated area of enquiry, but let me give one oblique but I hope still relevant example of what I mean, drawing on the canon of Patrick Geddes's work that still has such relevance to us today: should there not be a presumption, in every plan-making

process and every individual planning decision (where relevant), to maximise the opportunities for people to be in contact with the natural world – physical, sensory, tangible contact?

At the heart of Patrick Geddes's anxiety about the direction the world was taking in the early part of the 20th Century, was the phenomenon he described as "nature starvation". He despaired of one-off, piecemeal decisions that gradually stripped out nature from town and city centres, claiming on one occasion that: "since the Industrial Revolution, there has gone on an organised sacrifice of men to things, a large-scale subordination of life to machinery". He found it impossible to imagine sound educational systems that didn't constantly place children in nature, rather than reading about nature from afar or looking out on it from behind safe windows and walls. He hated two-dimensional maps, and scorned those educationalists who supposed that one can "read the world" through a map:

"The child's desire of seeing and hearing, touching and handling, of smelling and tasting are all true and healthy hungers, and it can hardly be too strongly insisted that good teaching begins neither with knowledge nor discipline, but through delight."

I would argue that most of us are still suffering from chronic nature starvation, and that this is as much a challenge for planners today as it was when Geddes was alive. So let me end with a very Geddesian assertion; that if we really want to save the world, then we must be constantly in the world, celebrating the indivisibility of all living matter, and bravely owning the oneness of life on Earth.

And I much look forward to seeing how that pans out in the new Planning Bill!

(May I add, as a brief post script to this written version of the Lecture originally given on 1st October 2004, that I'm hugely indebted for some of the quotes from Patrick Geddes that I have used here to the authors of a brand new book: "Think Global, Act Local: the Life and Legacy of Patrick Geddes". I can only say that this would have been a much better Lecture had I had access to the book before rather than after delivering it!)

Jonathon Porritt