

# Cities in Devolution

## The Sir Patrick Geddes Commemorative Lecture 2005

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### Introduction

It is a privilege - and a somewhat daunting prospect - to be asked to give this lecture. As an architectural student in the 1960's I came across *Cities in Evolution* and it had an important impact on me - Geddes one of the inspirations behind the Glasgow tenement rehab programme as it has developed! But I have to confess that it is several years since I opened it and read it; so my thanks to RTPI and Saltire society for giving me the opportunity of reading it again – and this time with some hindsight

This is not a lecture on what is in *Cities in Evolution*. I want to look at the relevance of some of his ideas in the book to Scotland today – Cities in Devolution. But it is fascinating to read the book some 90 years after its publication, and as I say with the benefit (?) of hindsight, which in my case is some 35 years of working in the regeneration of cities – mainly in housing.

I should admit right away that I am not a planner; I am not an economist; I am not an urban designer, and I am certainly not a botanist! I am an architect by training but not by practice! (I am still a member of the RIAS, and now as chair of Architecture+DesignScotland) I am basically a housing and community regeneration policy person. And in some ways Geddes can be considered as one of the founding fathers of a community based approach to regeneration.

Housing cannot be looked at in isolation – when we set up ASSIST in 1970 in Govan we were immediately bombarded with planning, legal, social and economic questions, so we learnt very quickly that interconnection or what Geddes would describe as 'Holism' was essential - place /work/ folk was very important.

And through my time in Scottish Homes, I became more aware of the need of considering place not just as the built environment, but more in terms of sustainability. Last year in this lecture Jonathan Porritt looked at Geddes as the father of sustainable development. I will try and avoid that area!

And although I now live in a small village of under 1000 population, and have a particular interest in rural housing and rural development, I have lived and worked in Glasgow (lived in Govan for 20 years), worked in Edinburgh and has had working relationship with the other cities. I have

also worked in Toronto and Copenhagen. Like most people in this room I visit and observe other cities, have been part of study tours and carried out research in other cities. And that is a fundamental part of our collective understanding of where we should be going – and of what Geddes would have wanted us to do as part of ‘civics’

It is through that experience that I look at cities, and through these eyes that I reread Geddes. So this is by way of an apology that I will only make passing reference to issues about city regions and conurbations which Patrick Geddes vividly describes in *Cities in Evolution*, and to some of the town planning issues that members of the RTPI hold dear.

Even rural dwellers like me recognise that Scotland is a highly urbanised country. 50% of us live in Large Towns & Cities; with a further 40% in Small Towns (1000 - 20,000). As a nation we were slow in urbanising, but when we got the idea, we urbanised fast! By 1850 we were (in European terms) second only to England in the percentage of our population living in settlements of over 10,000 inhabitants. And it continued – e.g. the Burgh of Govan grew from 9000 in 1860 to 90000 by 1904. Such rapid urbanisation, accompanied as it was by industrialisation based on polluting coal, a landless class, and with high density housing provided a perfect base from which Geddes could observe how our and other countries’ cities had developed, and to create a vision of a different kind of city. 90 years later, we are still struggling with the long term impact of that urbanisation, while coping with international competitiveness which even Geddes did not foresee.

### **Cities in Evolution**

Before getting into the subject in more depth, I would like to make a couple of comments about the book itself. It was published in 1915; although it was mainly written before the War (Curiously it has major chapters on Germany!)

In his introduction Geddes explains what he is trying to do in the book: It is *‘not a technical treatise for the town planner or city councillor, nor a manual of civics for the sociologist or teacher... nor is it solely an attempt at the popularisation of the reviving art of town planning, of the renewing science of civics, to the general reader... He appeals to his readers ‘To enter into the spirit of our cities, their historic essence and continuous life.*

It was aimed at a wide audience – effectively an introduction to Civics. This remains a challenge for us in Scotland today – of creating a Scotland where all of us are involved in placemaking. It is particularly an issue of how we get ‘citizens’ involved with planning and ‘Civics’

It is a book that is full of optimism. Geddes was an internationalist and a Eutopian – not with a ‘U’ of Sir Thomas More that implied an idealised ‘no place’ but Eutopia with an ‘Eu’ – that Geddes believed could be achieved through local and international co-operation. It is essentially an

ideal of consensus, of cities and communities where everyone shares common goals. *'Essential harmony of all these interests and aims'*

But can it be considered as too naïve? This kind of consensual approach ignores the socio-political context of the time - e.g. demand for universal suffrage, growth of trade unions, of the new left, Marxist inspired, like the ILP, and other 'bottom up' struggles that were brewing through the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. It is intriguing to think of some of the key events that were happening as it was published – e.g. Mary Barbour and the rent strikes in Glasgow.

It is as if planning can be separate from socio-politics. Indeed there is some evidence that Geddes was not fond of politicians, although in *Cities in Evolution* he thinks that *'A better attitude in town and county councils has been arising. Old councillors are improving or retiring; and new ones are coming in who may be as yet immature, and only semi-articulate, but are more awake to public and civic interests, to the condition of the people and their need of improved housing'*.

Murdo Macdonald in his essay *Patrick Geddes: Environment and Culture* suggests that Geddes was interested in anarchy as a political philosophy as it proposed a co-operative self-government based on a minimum of vested power –

not the anarchy of bombs but that of thoughtful social reformers. In our modern parlance is this **devolution** and subsidiarity?

### **The Geddes vision and the importance of housing to it**

Besides optimism, the other key thread that comes thru' *Cities in Evolution* is that of vision – of seeing and promulgating a new world. As a disciple of Huxley, Geddes was an evolutionary Visionary – a believer in the cooperative development of life's processes towards equilibrium rather than the barren struggle of Darwin's natural selection. He particularly sees his own time as on the cusp of major change in the industrial city. He divides the industrial phase in two (and uses his own variation of historical language to describe them):

- The **Paleotechnic** age: which he describes as life threatening – the exploitation of coal, steel, oil and people in the growth of the grimy industrial city, which ignores the natural world to satisfy human greed.
- The **Neotechnic** age: which he describes as life insurgent – the transition to a healthier environment using new cleaner energies (mainly electricity), in which nature conservation becomes a desirable imperative; with people being valued, a balance struck between work and leisure, and the natural environment becoming a necessary part of people's lives.

Where, one might ask, 90 years later, does Scotland sit today – how far are we in to the Neotechnic age? Certainly a century of creating a healthier environment has produced significant improvements, since we have lost most of the coal and steel based industries (oil still seems to be an issue of some contention!). The importance of the natural

environment to people's lives is certainly growing, as is a better balance between work and leisure.

Among Geddes' visions for the future, housing played a critical role. He has ideas to propose about how housing systems, layout and design should be altered and the impact that these would have upon the Neotechnic city. As ever, he has learnt from abroad. And he is concerned that Scotland lags behind. But Geddes can see that change is coming. He expects major changes to come from the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Industrial Population of Scotland which started in 1912 and reported in 1917 long after the book was finished. He was certainly not wrong – if anything could be said to have major impact on how our cities were to develop during the post Great War years, it could be the Royal Commission. Having reviewed in depth the housing conditions across Scotland, it argued that to a great extent the industrial unrest was due to workers not being able to spend their higher wages on better accommodation, especially as so many families were divided because of their inability to find any accommodation to house a united family. Failure to investigate, failure of private enterprise, failure of local authorities to appreciate their full powers, rapacity of owners for compensation, antiquated methods of arbitration, absence of a definite basis for compensation and the high prices of land, are amongst the obstacles to reform cited by the Commission. The Commission's primary recommendation was that for immediate and practical purposes, over a period of 14 years (with an opportunity of revision at the end of 7 years) the State should assume full responsibility for housing, and should operate through local authorities, on whom the obligation should be made statutory.

Thus was created the basis of housing policy that determined the main thrusts of city development in Scotland for the central years of 20th century. It also allowed for a form of Garden Cities that Geddes advocated strongly. For Geddes was critical of new tenements for working class people that were still being built before the First World War – citing tenements round the Singer Factory in Clydebank, and around the breweries at Duddingston - arguing that what should be built are Garden Cities and quoting as examples Port Sunlight, Bournville, New Earswick and Hampstead Garden Suburb. He was critical of the delays in getting the first Scottish Garden City established at Rosyth. And so he would be pleased to see some of the interwar housing in Scotland – the Knightswoods and the Mossbarks of this world, with their broad avenues, low rise housing set in individual gardens and with plenty of open space. But he would have been disappointed that the opportunity was missed to deliver housing through cooperatives or other ways in which the occupants were able to have an influence over their design and their management.

Geddes was an enthusiast for the Garden City Movement. He advocated them strongly in *Cities in Evolution* – an antidote to overcrowding; the separation of home from grimy workplaces; an opportunity for people to

be close to nature; of *'social co-operation and effective good will'*. And of course they required proper town planning. But he stresses that such *suburban* development depends on good transportation systems, and emphasises that the development of suburban railways, trams and now buses allows for the growth of suburbia.

What, one wonders, would Geddes have made of suburbia as it has become? Closely packed rows of virtually identical houses, grouped not round the village green as Howard and Unwin would have anticipated, but round the car. Cul-de-sacs designed to ensure that through traffic is kept to a minimum; indeed some people have suggested that the greatest influence on modern suburban layouts are not planners, but a mixture of insurance companies and the police, for whom *'Secured by Design'* appears to mean trying to see how close one can get the car to the living room, and to ensure that any stranger feels unwelcome walking around the place, and therefore stays away. It is a complete contrast to *'chumminess'* of Geddes' vision of the Garden City, of the cooperativeness and what later Jane Jacobs would describe as the *'eyes in the street'* approach of mixed communities.

And of course, Geddes would have expected developments to be properly serviced by public transport. One suspects that he would have been horrified by the way we approach the transportation issue now; our dependence on the car and the impact that it makes both on climate change and on city center congestion. He would have lauded the example of Copenhagen's new metro that connects Orestad (as the 6th finger in the famous Copenhagen 5 finger plan) that will provide for both city expansion and a suburban community on ex-military land. The metro was built before the houses thus establishing a high quality public transportation system that is in place as the houses are developed. There is no need to find rat runs or to use the car!

While there are exceptions to the modern suburban layouts – e.g. the Drum – the majority come nowhere near the criteria developed in the Scottish Executive's placemaking policy statement *Designing Places*:

- *Contributing to a sense of identity*
- *Creating safe and pleasant places*
- *Creating easier movement*
- *Offering a sense of welcome*
- *Contributing to adaptable places*
- *Making good use of resources*

In the introduction to *Designing Places*, we are reminded that Sam Galbraith (then Minister) asked the question *'Where are the conservation areas of tomorrow? And it's back to Geddes.'*

Geddes did of course advocate not only Garden Cities, but the regeneration of older town centres and the conservation of buildings that are part of the story of the development of our cities.

And while *Cities in Evolution* may be the book which inspires and sets out the vision of Eutopia; the Geddes that has always intrigued and inspired me personally has been his approach to the regeneration of the Old Town in Edinburgh. So with apologies to our host city, I would like to spend a little time looking at the impact of Geddes' work in the Old Town and its relevance to Scotland today.

With the creation of the New Town (what would now be regarded as a kind of posh suburb), the more prosperous folk moved out leaving the poorest people in the Old Town – a stinking, unsanitary place. No wonder that it was said in the 18th century that you could smell the Old Town from Dalkeith 8 miles away! And, during the 19th century, the creation of wealthy suburbs encouraged by the development of the tram and the suburban railway accentuated the gap between rich and poor. Whereas medieval Old Town Edinburgh had been, as someone quoted, 'where peers and prostitutes might share the same close', now they had been separated with the rich living in comfort and the poor in old decaying and insanitary buildings that would have been considered well 'below tolerable standard'. It makes Edinburgh in the 1800s sound like many a city today – with the city centre a place of work and entertainment, with those who can afford it living in the suburbs, and the poor in the ring around the city centre.

Geddes was appalled by the living conditions. He may have drawn our attention to the conditions of the working class in *Cities in Evolution*, but unlike many other commentators, he was also prepared to do something about it. 6 months after marrying Anna, the Geddeses moved into James Court, off the Lawnmarket in 1887. He began to improve it, and then organised the neighbours into communal action – not just undertaking physical improvements, but developing social programmes – for example Anna set up homemaking groups and Saturday sewing clubs.

Geddes was not just about improving the conditions of the poor. He clearly believed that socially and economically mixed communities were essential for the wellbeing of the city – and to encourage the better off to come back he developed Ramsay Gardens as co-operative flats to persuade University professors back to the Old Town. And Ramsay Gardens contains flats of a mixture of sizes, recognising that people are different.

And then there was the creation of a series of self-governing student hostels, including Riddle's Court.

But Geddes was not just concerned with the social and built environment. He had set up the Environment Society to improve and renew the Old Town environment. This was the organisation that grew to be the Edinburgh Social Union – reflecting Geddes' own view that environment and social concerns go hand in hand – Work/Folk/Place. The botanist advocated the Garden as a place where education through Hand, heart and eye could be achieved. So small sites were identified (the

most famous being Johnston Terrace) where local people – particularly young people – created gardens.

Then of course there was the Outlook Tower – taking over the Short's observatory and camera obscura and turning it into a place of information and of study – not just for aspiring professionals (particularly women) but for the general citizen who was to be enthused and excited about how cities have developed and the possibilities for the future – both here and abroad and to understand their own potential. Education was clearly fun!

Of course the amount of physical change that Geddes was personally able to achieve in the Old Town was small, but he inspired and set in motion an approach of combining the improvement of living conditions with building conservation, with (what we would now call) environmental improvements, with a socially mixed community.

As an aside, while considering the Old Town of Edinburgh, what would Geddes have made of the Scottish Parliament at the foot of the Old Town? I suspect he would have been pleased to find a new building and a new style – he was never one to encourage facadism, pastiche or preserving in aspic. For him, cities were living systems – bio-systems in which each generation made their own contribution while respecting and conserving the past. He would have liked a Parliament that was not an overly grand external architectural statement; that was worked into the fabric of the city and connected with the natural environment of Arthur's Seat. He would have understood that Scotland, a country for which language has been vitally important, should partially enclose its Parliament with a wall of words. Is it not time that that wall of words should include something by Geddes – probably 'Think Global, Act Local'?

## **Lessons**

And what of Geddesian lessons for us in the early 21st century? There are three particular ones I want to draw out.

### **I The centrality of the citizen in regeneration process**

Cities are made by citizens; we in the design professions provide a framework or backdrop to their actions. Whatever we do as design professionals, as citizens we alter, adapt and change our built environment. In our new Scotland we have begun to see the importance that good design has in creating a feeling of wellbeing and confidence. Architecture and design are about places for people; the pleasure that architecture can give also applies to residential places where people live and spaces between the buildings. And for us professionals, Geddes reminds us we are all designers and that when people are involved in the design of their place, they have a stake in it, own it and want to look after it.

Several years ago, Charles MacKean, then the Secretary of the RIAS, coined the phrase the 'Medicis of Maryhill' to describe the Community

Based Housing Association movement. They may not be the totally self help build groups that Geddes may have had in his Eutopian vision, but in many ways they are the natural successors to his co-operatives and to his Edinburgh Social Union. They have been concerned with housing conditions, have masterminded the regeneration of whole districts, have pioneered new urban housing, and are at the forefront of sustainability with attempts to both reduce fuel poverty and carbon emissions.

Perhaps, however, their major achievement has been as vehicles for community empowerment. Associations have undertaken social and economic programmes that have created communities of confidence. They have provided the basis for many people in so called 'deprived neighbourhoods' with the opportunity to manage change in their own communities, and to grow in self confidence. This fits very strongly with the Scottish Executive's regeneration policy *'Better Communities in Scotland: Closing the Gap'* which talks about community empowerment as a key component of transforming areas of social inclusion: *'a higher priority on providing individuals and communities with the skills and confidence necessary to take advantage of opportunities and to play a full part in the life of their communities'*.

One of the key things that have helped in this area of community empowerment is that of commissioning and working with design teams – particularly architects. There are a lot of young architects who have developed their skills in conjunction with local people in housing associations. Working with architects, with surveyors and contractors is a crucial empowering process. Communities are proud of having been involved in the process – “I was involved in that development; I have made a contribution to my community” I recently enjoyed a morning with Committee members of Community Based Housing Associations who were very keen to talk about how they were involved in design issues.

However, the pressures on the housing associations and on their regulator and paymaster – Communities Scotland – are such that efficiency drives (in other words – can we get more houses for the same or less amount of money) are proposing to reduce the number of developing associations, so that smaller (and community based) may have to buy their houses from a larger (and probably more professional) supplier.

So what does this say to people in these kind of communities – you can only have the cheapest houses, you are not to be encouraged to take charge of the process (buy your houses from 'experts?'), being a client is too complex a task for you? Are community based associations only to be regarded as capable of managing houses and not commissioning them? And if the design process is a major part of empowering people – what price is put on that?

We are about to have a modernised planning system. Much is made in the Consultation paper about the planning system becoming more inclusive – especially by front loading the process. This is clearly a sensible approach, but requires a cultural change amongst all stakeholders, including councillors and the public. To make the new planning system work, we need to equip people to engage effectively – what in regeneration terms has been called capacity building.

And capacity building applies equally to the professionals who have to develop new skills to work in new ways with stakeholders. How do we do this? Will there be sufficient resources made available for training?

## **2 Promoting good architecture and design**

This leads me to my second point. I believe that 21st century Scottish citizens are becoming more and more interested in planning, architecture and design. They are aspiring to higher quality buildings. This month thousands of Scots will pour through buildings of all shapes and sizes, old and new as part of Doors Open Days. The most unlikely people (like my local over 50's club) are queuing up to see round the new Parliament and are being stimulated by it – they may not all like it, but there is a debate going on. How do we capitalise on this interest?

There is a question of whether the planning system that we have encourages or could encourage better design. Close to where I live a little bungalow is being redeveloped – into a three storey mock Tower house, with numerous extensions. Friends ask me – how did it get planning permission when we (admittedly in a conservation area) have to match 19th century windows at an extension at the back of the house? Or are required to put up chimney stacks in a new all-electric house? There is some attraction in the notion of shifting away from asking the question – is this good enough to approve? (that is: *'it will just do'*) to the question is it bad enough to reject? (*it will just not do!*) But there is circularity here – it is back to the question – the critical question - of capacity building and training.

The general interest in architecture particularly may also have been stimulated by the appearance on our turf of some of the architectural superstars – like Foster, Gehry, Hadid. And how good are we at promoting our own talent? Tonight Scotland's latest Concert Hall opens in Perth. It is a major contribution to the cultural life of Scotland. Michael Tumulty of the Herald has raved already about its acoustics. But when the local paper carries out a major feature on, why does it mention the name of the architect, the engineer or the rest of the design team? How about giving the building designer equal billing with the creators of the music? I was encouraged when the Herald published an article on Paul Stellan after he became Architect of the Year – in the colour supplement, alongside other creative people. Let's have some more.

So where are the correspondents in our national papers on architecture, planning and the built environment? Do new buildings and planning

proposals not deserve to be reviewed (and perhaps given stars!) as other parts of the creative world – and not just reviewed in the professional magazines? How about a few less makeover programmes, and few more programmes that look at current developments both in the UK and elsewhere (particularly Europe) in housing and communities? Explaining issues such as sustainability? Geddes would, I am sure, have loved TV as a medium for getting his message across. Perhaps it our fault – maybe we need to improve the way we talk to the media. Do we want a public debate on what we are doing? Do we want our creative designers – like architects, landscape architects, urban planners – well known?

### **3 Sustainability is not just about economics**

Geddes was first and foremost a Botanist who became a renaissance man. 'A lad of pairts'. His triad - place/work/folk – is in that order because he believed firmly that folk could only be understood when work and place had been studied thoroughly. When folk chose their work they could shape the place according to their needs.

We live in generation that puts economic (work) at the top of the agenda. For our cities to thrive, they must be economically viable. That becomes the driving force. Scottish Cities are vitally important as our economic powerhouses, as the major meeting places for people, and for tourism. But the quality of our cities, the quality of places, is fundamental to the quality of life we can offer to our citizens. The Executive has recognised the importance of placemaking - *“The quality of Scotland’s built environment is important, not only to our own quality of life, but to the perception of the country abroad as an outstanding place to be.”* (First Minister Jack McConnell).

There is a new confidence growing in Scotland. It’s represented by the kind of slightly cheeky catchphrase that helped Glasgow develop its confidence in the 1980’s – ‘Glasgow Smiles Better’. This catchphrase is that we are the ‘best small country’ in the world. If that is the league we want to play in, then we ought to look at other areas of performance in what would be our competitors - and in particular the role that environmental sustainability and placemaking plays. Who are our competitors? Scandinavia, Switzerland, the Netherlands? Are these not countries that that give a high priority to the design of their places, to the importance of ‘greenspace’, to the involvement of their citizens, and to sustainability? We perhaps need to start to create placemaking indicators that enable us to see how we do compare and to consider the impact that the quality of placemaking has on economic performance and social confidence.

Geddes was a botanist and for him a garden and green space was critical. The whole question of the status of landscaping and public spaces within regeneration is still to be accepted in Scotland as something for all, not just for city centres, where the economic and tourist benefits are understood. Two years ago, as part of a study on Mainstreaming Sustainable Regeneration undertaken by the Sustainable Development

Commission, we highlighted the importance of good landscaping to health and quality of life. Public space professionals – including landscape architects - are often the Cinderellas of regeneration. They are frequently only brought in to ‘decorate’ an area, like icing on the ‘real’ cake of jobs, inward investment, better housing, and social integration. If we want to create sustainable regeneration, and sustainable cities then public space professionals and others with environmental concerns have to be included in the overall team and at a much earlier stage. They in turn need to persuade other members of the regeneration team that green space needs should to be planned into regeneration projects from the outset, and greater consideration should be given to the natural functions of ‘green infrastructure’ (e.g., improving air quality, water management, habitat creation), and the mental and physical health benefits it brings. Think Fairfield, Perth (in 1981 it was the enumeration district with the highest level of multiple deprivation) where one of the keys to turning round was the landscaping.

### **And finally**

I want to finish with a suggestion – particularly relating to the issues of capacity building and the participation of citizens in our place making activities. Mention the name of Patrick Geddes to many people and after they have stopped saying ‘Think Global, Act Local’, ‘Place, work, folk’, and ‘sympathy, synthesis, synergy’, will say ‘Outlook Tower’. That great institution in which Geddes sought to explain and analyse the city of Edinburgh, the evolution of the city and how cities have grown elsewhere. It was a base for teaching, for citizens and professionals to come together. The evolution of the city was shown through three dimensional models. It encouraged learning from abroad. If we are to develop a Scotland of confident people living, working and playing in excellent surroundings; a country whose built environment matches its natural environment; a country that encourages and promotes its creative talents in architecture, planning and placemaking; and which is genuinely at the top of the league of the best small countries, then perhaps we need to think again about the ‘Outlook Tower’.

We need to ‘up our game’, not just as professionals, but as citizens. And the Outlook Tower is a model for that kind of development. The Executive is currently promoting the ‘6 Cities Festival’ that starts in 2007. How about if each city was to have an updated Outlook Tower for its city? What could it include?

- An education centre – for schools and for the general public; with potential relationship with local colleges and university
- A history of how the city has evolved
- The plans for the city
- A huge model of the city (whatever happened to the Glasgow model?)
- Awareness raising on issues such as sustainability, environmental protection
- Capacity building for the new planning system
- An opportunity for citizen participation in future planning

- A place for visiting exhibitions on placemaking (like the Bavarian exhibition)
- A base for more formal courses for professional groups
- Design advice
- Local planning aid
- A 21st century form of Camera Obscura – using CCTV technology!

Such a series of local arrangements should be complemented by national programmes including study visits abroad. And we need to see placemaking and the citizens' role therein as a fundamental part of developing the new Scotland. In doing so, we could honour Sir Patrick Geddes by showing that the visionary approach set out in *Cities in Evolution* is as relevant today as it was 90 years ago when the book was first published.

Key references:

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