

VOLKER WELTER – BIOPOLIS: PATRICK GEDDES AND THE CITY OF LIFE

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Reviewed by Fernando Diniz Moreira¹

Patrick Geddes (1854-1932) had one of the most genial minds of the last two centuries devoted to cities. His uncommon academic background shaped his approach to cities. When studying biology with Thomas Huxley during the 1870s, Geddes was influenced by his investigations of the geography of valleys, with their infinite variety of organic forms, plants and animals, and their interdependence. Thus, Geddes realized that the human component was also part of this environment and that the city was the highest form of human life. The influence of French social thought of the late 1870s, particularly the emerging sciences of sociology and geography, also shaped Geddes understanding of the city. Geddes extended the theories of Auguste Comte, Frederic Le Play and Elisée Reclus to the study of human settlements and he was among the first to adopt a unified perspective to understand urban development in its context. His ideas can be glimpsed in his book *Cities in Evolution*, published in 1915, but many of his brilliant contributions were dispersed over reports on plans for Edinburgh, Tel Aviv and for many Indian cities.²

Considered one of the founding fathers of modern urbanism, Patrick Geddes is best remembered for introducing the concept of *region* and for calling for *survey before the plan* in the urbanistic debate of the early 20th century. He also coined the term *conurbation*, the growing together of urban settlements. However, his contribution has largely been reduced to these three slogans (*the region and the city*, *survey before plan*, and *conurbation*) and his ideas have never been properly understood. Most of the writings about him are biographies which do not penetrate into his ideas.³ Volker Welter offers for the first time a major work on the theory of Patrick Geddes, going beyond common assumptions and situating him in the larger intellectual ambiance of the 19th century. Welter has elucidated the work of Geddes from the architectural historian's viewpoint, but this does not mean that he has restricted himself to the forms of Geddes's urban schemes.

The first chapter provides an overview of Geddes' background. The second chapter, analyzes Geddes's less well known 'thinking machines', including the often misunderstood 'notation of life'. Welter analyzes the diagram 'Notation of Life', which Geddes used to characterize the interdependent four-part division which formed the city: Town, School, Cloister, and City, an idea which is central to his thought. According to Geddes, a Town or a village is a human settlement on a territory whose members are involved in some kind of activity. In the Town, Schools exist in order to perpetuate knowledge and experience. However, for Geddes, a Town will never rise to a higher level of societal evolution, the City. The City would only emerge if the Cloister, a space for meditation and imagination, were created from the schools. The Cloister is for the School, what the City is for the Town, and the great City consists of a balanced relationship

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² Patrick Geddes, *Cities in Evolution*. London: Williams & Norgate, 1915.

³ Biographies of Geddes includes: Philip Boardman, *Patrick Geddes: Maker of the Future*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944. Helen Meller, *Patrick Geddes: Social Evolutionist and City Planner*. London: Routledge, 1990.

between these components. If the cloister degenerates into a school, the city will degenerate into the level of a town.

Welter uses Geddes' well-known analytical triad — *place*, *work*, and *folk*, corresponding to the geographical, historical, and spiritual aspects of the city — as the basic structure for his examination of Geddes' urban theory. In the following chapters, he analyzed Geddes' thinking through the three unifying themes of his work - the city and region (*place*), history (*work*) and spirituality (*folk*).

Welter's most innovative contribution is the revealing analysis of the spiritual aspects of the city in Geddes. Although Geddes' mind was a creation of the rationality and scientific progress of the 19th century, he became increasingly interested in spirituality and metaphysics at the closing of the century. Geddes was committed to the reconciling of science with morality and aesthetics in the modern age, and the site of this reconciliation was the city.

In the last three chapters, Welter focuses on the theme City and Spirituality, an ignored area of Geddes' work, which is central to understanding his comprehensive theory of the city. Welter analyzes Geddes' commitment to secular temples of art and science, uniting religion, art and science in a guiding force for the urban community. He reveals unknown Geddes' "secular and quasi-religious temple projects", which became common in the architectural thought in the early 20th century, particularly those of German Expressionists, like Bruno Taut and Wassily Luckhardt.

Welter shows that the complex relationship between biology and the city was much more sophisticated than the direct assumption that the city was an organic entity. In addition to the biological thought, Geddes was also interested in the historical Greek concept of polis, which he saw as one of the highest balanced forms of human association in history. Welter develops an exciting comparison between Geddes' thinking and that of Plato's Republic.

In sum, Welter's book is outstanding. Based on scholarly research, he is able to enter into Geddes' world and summarize his comprehensive approach to the city, without resorting to slogans. We have now a better understanding of Geddes' location within the history of the emergence of modern planning and the debate about the city. Geddes defies the simplistic assumption that the debate about the modern city was all about rationality, and efficiency.

Due to the multifaceted work of Geddes, one would have preferred more analysis in some specific areas, such as his relationship with his friends and disciples, such as Marcel Po  te and Lewis Mumford, the analysis of some of his plans in India or Scotland, or even his park schemes, but these are no more than minor lapses, which are largely compensated for by the overall importance of this book.

Why is the reading of Geddes important for those of us, who are concerned with the making of more livable and sustainable cities today? Geddes' comprehensive approach can reveal to us a better understanding of their delicate relationship with the surrounding territory, their natural site and their social and economic aspects. A study of Geddes makes clear that he was not interested in the history of the city itself but in its evolution, the immanent principles which govern its evolution. Geddes teaches us to "enter in the spirit of our cities, its historical essence and its continuous life"⁴. The careful study of the

⁴ Patrick Geddes, *Cities in Evolution*, 4.

creation, evolution, organization and functioning of cities, and the comparison between them, would enable the urban planner to think through the future of the city. Refusing to create geometric and abstract plans, Geddes believed that the real goal of city planning was to allow the city to develop organically. The city must grow towards an ideal and the path to this stage already exists in the city and the city planner should help the citizens to achieve this ideal by discerning these patterns in the organism.⁵ Consequently, Geddes focused on the amelioration of existing cities, not in their radical transformation. He was one of the first planners to realize the need to conserve historic city centers.

During the twentieth century, urban planning has become more and more bureaucratic, and mechanical. The reappraisal of Geddes' thinking is an important step to the revitalization of current planning practice, restoring it to its prominent position, and guiding the development and conservation of our cities. Welter's book is important step toward this enterprise.

⁵ Ibid., 304-305.