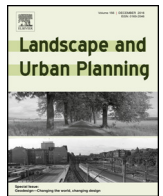




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### Research Paper

# “Free cities and regions”—Patrick Geddes’s theory of planning

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Regional planning founder Sir Patrick Geddes's work is receiving renewed interest.
- However, many leading US university planning programs do not teach Geddes's works.
- Many Geddes scholars state he lacked a theory of planning or critique of power.
- Geddes did have a theory of planning and power relevant to contemporary issues.
- Geddes's “survey” undermines the nature/society divide opening new planning paths.

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### ABSTRACT

Patrick Geddes is a recognized founder of urban and regional planning. Despite this accolade, a review of US planning programs reflects Geddes's work largely absent from planning pedagogy. Recently interest in Geddes has revived in several fields. However, many researchers, particularly in planning, still criticize his ideas as lacking a coherent theoretical framework or as obsolete in addressing the power relations in contemporary cities and social movements. In this paper, I seek to augment recent work on Geddes as well as explore criticisms of his approach. I examined published and archival manuscripts dealing with Geddes's approach to planning. I argue Geddes did, across his voluminous output, frame a consistent planning theory valuable for contemporary environmental planning and social movements. I conclude by calling for wider reintroduction of Geddes's ideas into planning education and research.

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## 1. Introduction

Patrick Geddes (1854–1932), noted biologist, botanist, geographer, and sociologist is frequently identified as a founder of modern town and regional planning (Hysler-Rubin, 2009; Kitchen, 1975; Royal Town Planning Institute, 2012; University of Dundee, 2007). Despite this honor, Geddes has occupied a tenuous and mutable position in planning history, education, and practice. As planning historian Noah Hysler-Rubin documents, the interpretation of Geddes's role and importance (or lack thereof) in planning has fluctuated markedly over the years (Hysler-Rubin, 2011). Subject of a range of biographies, critics view Geddes as “a cult figure” whose work is largely unread and whose ideas garner, at best, passing reference in most planning classes. As a result, some researchers have described Geddes as “a unique, albeit forgotten planner” to whom homage is made but whose theories and ideas remain tangential to

planning theory and practice (Hysler-Rubin, 2011, 2; Meller, 1990, 321).

More recently, Geddes's work has experienced a revival among several disciplines seeking to restore or reveal Geddes's role and continued relevance to the foundation and development of their fields (Scott & Bromley, 2013; Stephens, 2004; Welter, 2002). While marking Geddes's extensive influence on thinkers and practitioners in fields as disparate as geography, architectural history, sociology, and education they are frequently forced to share a project of (re)establishing his fundamental position in forming their disciplines. This project is perhaps most pronounced in planning where “in spite, of Geddes's recognition as an important member of the town planning movement and of his great influence upon it, he has always been considered to be an outsider” (Hysler-Rubin, 2011, 2).

In this paper I seek to elucidate Geddes's theory of planning and make the case for its relevance to contemporary issues. Drawing on Geddes's original work as well as historical and recent secondary literatures, I argue against critics who state he formulated no coherent theory of planning or power dynamics and seek to augment

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more recent attempts by authors to describe Geddes's theory of city development and its relevance for our times.

## 2. Background: The death and rebirth of Patrick Geddes

A cause of Geddes's perennial periods of obscurity argues Helen Meller, one of Geddes's several biographers, is that many "academic specialists fiercely reject him" while often those "closely concerned on a professional level with the disciplines most nearly related to his work, biology, sociology, geography, and town planning, have shown greatest antipathy to him" (Meller, 1990, 318). A reason, critics note, is the often convoluted, dense style of his works: "Geddes' writings and diagrams have been accused of ambiguity, described as incomprehensible, confusing and always in need of personal explanation or mediation" (Hysler-Rubin, 2009, 349). Thus, except among a few adherents, until recently researchers could declare the content and influence of much of Geddes's and his acolytes' social theory "has been forgotten and ignored" and therefore by "conventional academic terms there is no doubt that Geddes was a failure." (Meller, 1990, 318; Scott and Bromley, 2013, 1).

However, as noted above, significant new works have emerged in fields such as environmental planning, sociology, and geography investigating Geddes intellectual influences, contributions, and impacts in establishing "a broader modernity."

While a variety of disciplines have recently considered his idea of the city, its planning, and development, even those researchers who have approached Geddes's work favorably, critics note, "usually discuss only elements from the overall theory, neglecting his full vision;" as a result, "the historiography of his work lacks a basic attempt to trace his overall planning system" (Hysler-Rubin, 2011, 3; Scott & Bromley, 2013; Stephens, 2004; Welter, 2002).

Thus, many critics in the planning field still view Geddes as an eccentric, historical figure who produced "no coherent body of theory" (McKean, 2005, 1). This status is reflected in a review of planning history and theory courses offered at the 15 top-rated university planning programs in the United States (Planetizen, 2012). Only five courses at as many universities included original work by Geddes. In each case the offering consisted of a single article. In three of the five cases this reading was the same piece: Geddes's "City Survey for Town Planning Purposes, of Municipalities and Government" excerpted from his book, *Cities in Evolution* (Tajchman, 2013).

Researchers and public intellectuals identify Geddes himself as cause of the obscurity of many of his ideas, arguing Geddes often "failed to coherently express the innovative view he had of the world" (McDonald, 2006, 1). Indeed, Geddes, unlike his more famous town and regional planning contemporary, Ebenezer Howard, never set down his perspective in a single book but rather promulgated his ideas in a voluminous, evolving, and often piecemeal fashion over forty five years of writing. Lacking a tenured university position, engaged in constant travel, and maintaining a strong commitment to civic activism and family life, Geddes had little time for revising or editing works published often in limited runs. Even *Cities in Evolution*, Geddes most widely distributed book admittedly falls short: "while chapters seem to be packed with information about the nature of modern civilization and what must be done to ensure favorable evolutionary trends for the future, there is no coherent structure to the book" (Meller, 1990, 321). Additionally, Lewis Mumford, one of Geddes's greatest disciples, advocates, and interpreters noted Geddes' speaking style was such that he "never could speak effectively to an audience of more than 20 people" (Mumford, 1970, 1).

Beyond obscurity of his ideas, other critics argue Geddes's conceptualization of social conflict a dead letter in addressing present-day issues. As H. G. Simmons cautioned in 'Patrick Ged-

des: Prophet without politics': "It is wrong to look at Geddes for new insights into contemporary problems" (Simmons, 1976, X). Recent authors, while more generous about Geddes's present-day relevance, have echoed Geddes lacked sophisticated analyses of politics, class, or power – concepts fundamental to any contemporary theory of planning (Welter, 2002). His ideas concerning the struggle for social evolution, they argue, are product of a particular historical context whose relevance has passed.

The remaining ideas they often deem naïve, reactionary, or of limited value. For example, work in the field of cultural geography situates Geddes's planning ideas "in the service of empire, ultimately incorporating [Geddes] within the postcolonial critique" (Hysler-Rubin, 2011, 61). Geddes's planning theory is accused of reinforcing imperial mandates "for purposes of economic exploitation" against peripheral nations and peoples (Hysler-Rubin, 2011, 62; Naylor & Jones, 1997). Furthermore, Geddes's 'paleotechnic' and 'neotechnic' typology, concepts central to his analysis of cities and their prospects receive scarce mention in Welter's and Hysler-Rubin's recent treatments of Geddes's theory of urban evolution and planning. Such concepts, Meller argues, "were tools for analyzing the environment, not an explanation of social change" (Meller, 1990, 320).

## 3. Hypothesis and methodology

In this paper I seek to add to the recent interest in Geddes's work. I propose Geddes did develop a coherent, accessible, comprehensive theory of planning. I offer it remains relevant today, encompassing social criticism as well as the objectives, methods, and tools necessary to plan for significant social change. In exploring these points I reviewed a wide range of Geddes's principal and peripheral theoretical writings from 1884 to 1927 dealing with his ideas on planning, sociology, and history. My review included published materials and unpublished documents from the National Library of Scotland's Geddes archive. To supplement the exploration of primary source material, I drew upon several of his biographers and a range of historical and recent academic manuscripts.

In this article I focus on Geddes's planning theory and goals rather than specific plans he produced for communities in Scotland, India, Israel, and elsewhere. Furthermore I attempt to show, in brief, examples of how Geddes' theoretical work provides a framework for strengthening contemporary urban planning and social movements, and offers a compelling vision for present day efforts to achieve progressive social change.

## 4. Theory

### 4.1. Theory's contemporary crisis

Many researchers perceive the twenty-first century's "market triumphalism" as planning's death knell. In the conservative right and postmodern left the idea and efficacy of hierarchical, centralized planning has been condemned as coercive, unwieldy, or simply outdated (Friedmann, 2011). Similarly, postmodernity, long opposed to "grand narratives" and rival to modernity's influence in planning has come under critique (Young, 2016). As a result, "the theoretical object of planning thus remains open and necessarily contested" (Friedmann, 2011, 135). While this invites theoretical innovation, the nature of this impasse obstructs efforts to address many large-scale issues facing contemporary society.

An example of the uncertain passage beyond this stalemate is Manuel Castells's concept of the network society. Castells argues social change movements can attain power, influence, and resiliency from diverse, decentralized networks. While not-

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