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Patrick Geddes: the conservative surgeon

"Here then are more lessons for new conservative surgeons:
action will follow example, and if the people are involved in the
improvements . . . they will endure . . ." *David Lock*

As the urban conservation movement settles into maturity, the blind call for preservation of everything is happily giving way to a more considered approach: new uses for old buildings are seen as the justification for preservation; careful survey and analysis of existing urban qualities is now becoming more common; and a patient and personal attention to detail has been cultivated in the implementation of GIA programmes and is at last spilling over into other areas of urban renewal (the Industrial GIA is a good example). The word "conservatism" has begun to mean more than "preservation".

Meanwhile, for connected reasons, a more creative and constructive community attitude to development and change appears to be emerging. Catering for the needs of industry and commerce is coming to be seen as equally important as catering for social well-being and aesthetic pleasure. There is talk of the need for new investment, minor adjustments and improvements, in short we are learning the skill of what Patrick Geddes called "conservative surgery". The significant word is "surgery", and it is the point at which the conservationist becomes a surgeon that signals a move to make cities fit for tomorrow.

So, as our urban conservationists grow into being conservative surgeons, what will they find of Geddes that will be of interest?

First they will see the importance he attached to learning by doing. When Geddes married in 1886, and long before he had developed his interest in civics and planning, he settled with his wife in James Court, off the Royal Mile in Edinburgh. Today the Royal Mile presents a prim façade of improved houses and restoration, but some of the courts behind the façade are damp, dark and insanitary. In 1886 the street was damp, dark and insanitary, back and

front: in fact it was said that the slums were maintained by the University in order to ensure a handy supply of human specimens for the medical school. Anarchist Kropotkin was impressed by Geddes' move to the slums, telling his friends how "a young teacher in Edinburgh who, four years ago, was making plans of statistical sociology beyond all bounds, has now just got married, leaving his house and taking a very poor flat among the workers". (1) Once in residence with an old shirt as an overall, Geddes spent hours clearing rubbish, scrubbing, washing down and repairing. Whitewash then provided a spectacular improvement, and one by one, as the weeks went by, his neighbours "began to give their own time to the jobs that Geddes persuaded them to tackle with him, clearing, whitewashing or gardening; nor could they work beside him, listening to his flow of ideas about the job in hand and the further possibilities, without catching something of his sanguine spirit. For the first time they began to feel that something could be done to change their surroundings". (2) The enthusiasm was sustained, the improvements maintained, and a new spirit of hopefulness generated in slums whose inhabitants had known only despair. Here, then, are more lessons for new conservative surgeons: action will follow on example, and if people are involved in the improvement of their own surroundings, the improvements will endure.

Most dramatic was the first act of surgery, however, when one particularly crumbling part of the court was pulled down by Geddes and his neighbours, letting in light and air, and providing a tiny plot for a garden. In fact the tower was part of an ancient palace, but the surgery not only improved the court for the residents but showed the historic building to better advantage. In following months there were other flats and other courts that Geddes helped improve.

Of this period of Geddes' work it is written: (3) "he did not believe in razing society to the ground in

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order to rebuild a new society in its place. His biological training was of value in revealing to him, through the hard experience of direct social experiment, that, important as surroundings might be, the inherent factor was not less important, and that the degradation of surroundings was an index of the degradation of the people who inhabited them."

This personal involvement in the practical aspects of civic improvement provided a foundation for Geddes' more synoptic civic proposals in Cyprus, Paris and elsewhere, of which the best known is his epic report to the Carnegie Dunfermline Trust, and published in 1904 under the title *City Development: a study of parks, gardens and culture institutes* (4). The Trust had invited Geddes and a professional town planner called Mawson to compete with ideas for the use of £500 000 and the thousand-acre Pitencrieff estate to bring to "the monotonous lives of the toiling masses of Dunfermline more of sweetness and light". Carnegie specifically said in his Deed of Trust: "remember you are pioneers, and do not be afraid of making mistakes. Not what other cities have is your standard".

Geddes' method was to soak himself in the area: the word "survey" does not adequately describe the weeks he spent literally tramping over the park and round the streets, often all night, and in all weathers. When the weather was fine, he hired a local photographer who recorded vistas chosen by Geddes: back alleyways, vacant sites, rubbish tips, derelict buildings, even broken sewer pipes. With these plates and a huge quantity of notes and sketches, he went down to London to write his report.

City Development is the first full exposition of Geddes' conservative surgery techniques, though by comparison with his later work in India it can be criticised for being naïve, and cosmetic. Certainly his proposed improvements are clumsily drawn and often aesthetically motivated, but it must be remembered that the task was partly aesthetic, and in his proposals for "culture-institutes" he shows himself to be fully cognisant of the social and economic potential of the existing community. His scheme was rejected by the Trustees, for whom it was too imaginative.

City Development is still easily obtained at most libraries. Unfortunately, the reports that arose from Geddes' work in India, and which contain the fullest exposition of conservative surgery, are extremely rare. Only fragments of one of the 13 reports made in the Madras Presidency in 1915 were available to Philip Boardman in his important biographies of Geddes, (5) though thanks to SSRC-sponsored work in recent years some xerox copies of the remainder are promised to the National Library of Scotland. It is necessary to rely heavily on the excellent book *Patrick Geddes in India* (6) published in 1947 and available from good libraries. It is a short book, comprising a selection of quotes from Geddes' Indian reports, selected by H V Lanchester and Geddes' son Arthur,

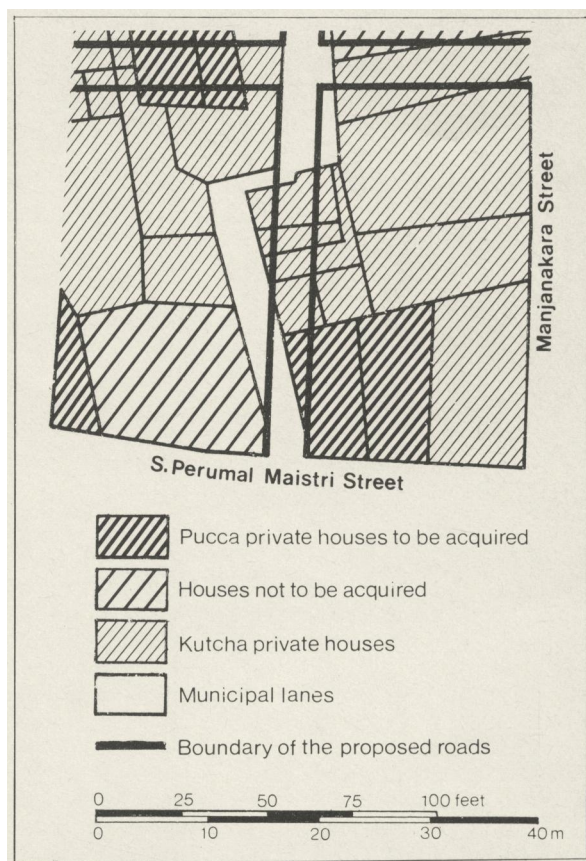


Figure 1: Madura: Uppukara Block: part of the Municipal Council's proposals.

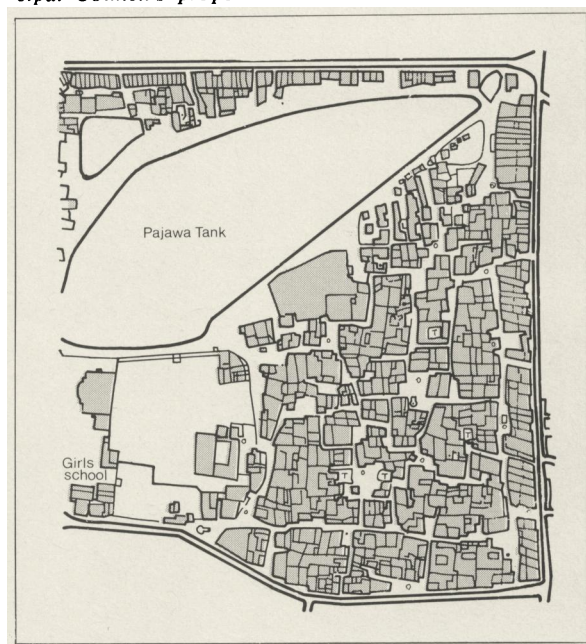


Figure 3: Balrampur: the quarter south of the Palace and of Pajawa Tank from the Municipal Plan.

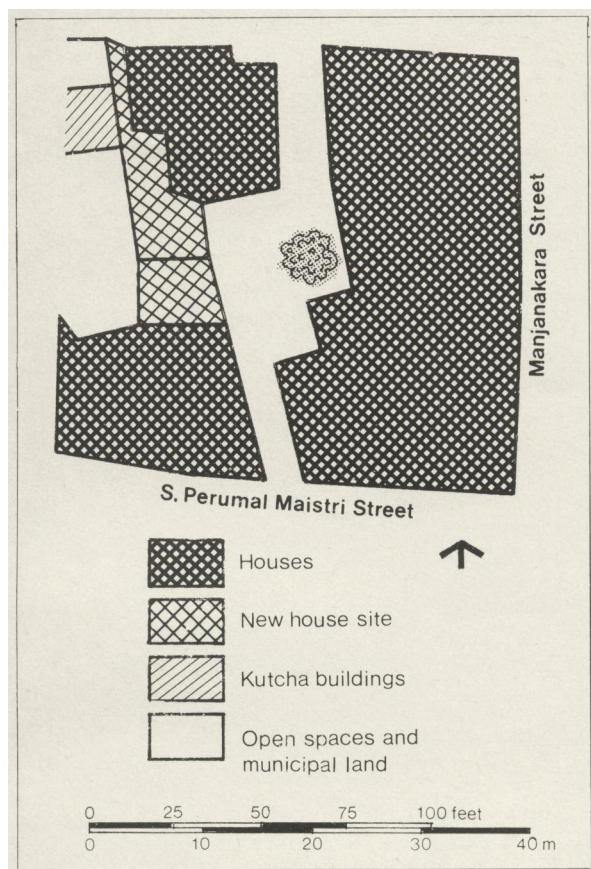


Figure 2: Madurai: the same corner as it would appear after application of "conservative surgery".

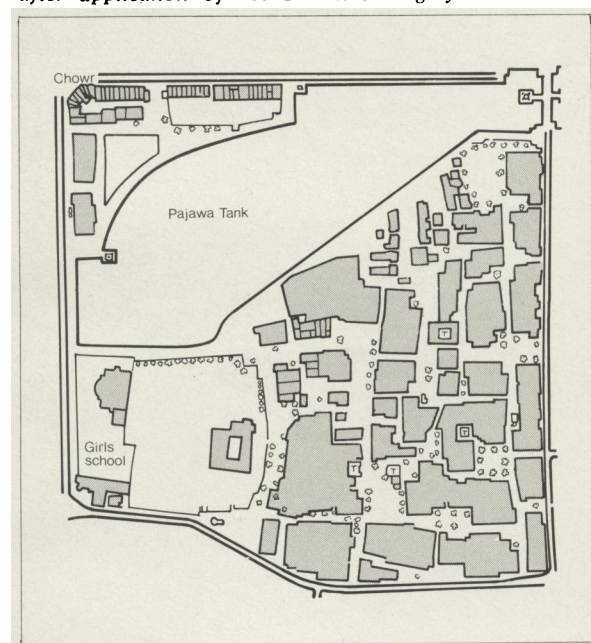


Figure 4: Balrampur: the same quarter as improved. (All drawings from "Patrick Geddes in India").

(both of whom were actually involved in the work in the first place), and edited by Jacqueline Tyrwhitt. From a copy of the two-volume Indore report of 1918 (7) that was found in the RTPI library this summer, however, it is clear that *Patrick Geddes in India* gives no more than a hint of the methods and uses to which conservative surgery was put by Geddes.

H V Lanchester and Arthur Geddes chose excerpts from the Tanjore and Ballary reports of 1915 (8) to show what Geddes was up against: road widening lines laid down by engineers with just the same kind of straight line mentality that is having to be fought today; and second, "the policy of sweeping clearances" that, said Geddes, "should be recognised for what I believe it is; one of the most disastrous and pernicious blunders in the chequered history of sanitation", third, "destructive impatience" that "is, indeed, an old vice of beginners in a position of authority"; and fourth, the disadvantage by the poor in the face of any civic scheme, who are first to be displaced, and who ("as rarely happens), when offered a suitable site for relocation find themselves "practically excluded by the present cost of building in favour of the most prosperous classes".

In his 1917 report on Lucknow, (9) Geddes puts the problem into terms that we can recognise: "the nineteenth century industrial order sought a good location for its industrial undertakings in terms of situation and communications. It then confused and deteriorated these advantages into the planless muddle of industrial Glasgow or Bombay, of Calcutta or London's East End. Deterioration of both the worker and his work and also of the management increased, as the good situation with which they had started became wasted and spoilt. We are now awakening from all this . . . yet there must be no mere sentimental renewals of village customs now obsolete, or of artistic embellishments now outworn . . . the problem is how to accomplish this return to the health of village life, with its beauty of surroundings and its contact with nature, upon a new spiral turning beyond the old one which, at the same time, frankly and fully incorporates the best advantages of town-life.

"It is with such a standpoint that we must plan the present area. We have to work out, around this economic centre, conditions for improved dwellings and social life without losing or sacrificing any of its business or industrial advantages but rather by increasing and improving upon them."

And so to the 1915 Madurai report (10) for a small illustration of conservative surgery in practice. Figure 1 shows the municipal proposals for part of a street block. Geddes walked through the passage, though, and noted that the first house scheduled for demolition was "as substantial, decent and even pleasing, as one could wish to see". Why not leave that house, he asks, but remove the sheds and ruins behind it, which "has the immediate result (Figure 2)

of widening the present crooked lane into a pleasant square, large enough to plant a tree in"? Opposite are two vacant sites which could be purchased with money saved by not demolishing the first house, thereby gaining two plots: "room for two good new houses to compensate for two bad ones that we may, further on, have to destroy". "This", writes Geddes, "is but the opening of the game, but it commends itself to the commonsense of my companions. We work on together in this way hour after hour and gradually a new plan evolves. . . ."

In this painstaking way Geddes constructed the plans of the conservation surgeon to replace those of the municipal technicians. His answer to their ruthless solutions was commonsense. How irritating he must have been to them, but how much better would have been the cities had they followed his advice. Figure 3 shows the plan of part of Balrampur as Geddes found it in 1871, and Figure 4 shows the Geddesian alternative of conservative surgery. The Pajawa Tank is a reservoir that was to have been filled (to prevent malaria), but Geddes proposed instead that it be cleaned and stocked with larva eating fish, thereby retaining water supply, providing a source of food and place of recreation, and helping to cool the hot air of the city streets. Trees are used to give shade, texture, fruit, and to delineate property rights. Derelict and cleared sites are used for gardens and as replacement plots for those who are persuaded to give up existing homes for civic improvements. "For such improvements to have their full value", wrote Geddes, "the work should be done comprehensively and within a short period of time. There is no wiser saying in the writing of John Stuart Mill . . . than his reminder that, if we would improve the condition of the people, the improvement must be on a scale that they can observe and realise; not frittered away piecemeal as are so many municipal improvements. In these cases the changes pass unnoticed and are neglected. In the former case they are appreciated and the people rise to the occasion."

Elsewhere, in the 1915 Madura Report, Geddes wrote: "the principle of conservative surgery justifies itself (as) . . . even the most politic method for, by treating the population with this consideration, we can far more readily take them with us. True, even upon this conservative plan, we find that a number of families will have to be evicted. In this particular case (in Madura) it comes to eight families instead of 20 times that number. It should, however, be comparatively easy to compensate these few families sufficiently to find, or to build, homes that are better than those they have left and that are still at no great distance . . . This small amount of disturbance can be faced by the commonsense of the community and even the evicted can be expected to accept the situation with good will . . ."

"How very different from the present state of affairs would be a city in which such active co-opera-

tion would arise spontaneously between the citizens and their town council!"

Folk-planning

It is also in the Madura report that we find the celebrated quotation, that "town-planning is not mere place-planning, nor even work-planning. If it is to be successful, it must be folk-planning . . . its task is to find the right places for each sort of people; places where they will really flourish. To give people in fact the same care that we give when transplanting flowers, instead of harsh evictions and arbitrary instruction to 'move-on', delivered in the manner of officious amateur policemen".

Finally, we can draw a quotation from Geddes' book *Cities in Evolution*, published in England in 1915 while he was in India. It is a statement of the general stance of conservative surgery, and seems entirely appropriate for contemporary consideration: "we might readily enter the current discussions of (the city's) industrial future, as to which there are two fairly distinct schools—the first simply clamouring to Jove for "new industries" of any or every sort (and not getting them); the second more disposed to consider the whole situation—the existing place, work and people, with their existing advantages and aptitudes, limitations and possibilities; and then thinking out the further development and better correlation of these."

"This is no mere policy of conservatism, of letting things alone as they are" (he writes in the 1918 Indore report), but is that of "antisepsis and conservative surgery."

Having stopped the bulldozer in the name of preservation have we the courage to reach for the surgeon's knife? Test your local plan *against* that!

References

- 1 Quoted by Philip Boardman in *The Worlds of Patrick Geddes*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1977 (publication imminent at the time of writing) and *Maker of the future*, University of North Carolina Press, 1944.
- 2 Geddes' daughter Norah quoted by Philip Mairet in *Pioneer of sociology*, Lund Humphries, London 1957.
- 3 James Mavor, *My windows on the street of the world*, J M Dent, London 1923.
- 4 Republished in facsimile by the Irish University Press in 1973.
- 5 See footnote 1 above.
- 6 Edited by Jacqueline Tyrwhitt, Lund Humphries, London 1947.
- 7 *Town planning towards city development: a report to the Durbar of Indore*, forming part of the collection of historic books retained by the RTPI when it recently gave over its library to the care of the DOE.
- 8 Both were part of Geddes' *Report on the towns in the Madras Presidency*.
- 9 *Town Planning in Lucknow: a second report to the Municipal Council*.
- 10 Another in the series referred to in footnote 8 above.
- 11 Republished by Ernest Benn Ltd, London 1968.