



# UCL

## WORKING PAPERS SERIES

**Paper 138 - July 08**

Geddes at UCL

“There was something  
more in town planning  
than met the eye!”

ISSN 1467-1298



# Geddes at UCL

“There was something more in town planning  
than met the eye!”<sup>†</sup>

Michael Batty & Stephen Marshall

Bartlett School of Planning, University College London,  
Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT  
<http://www.casa.ucl.ac.uk/>

July 2008

Patrick Geddes was at UCL from 1877 to 1878 although as a student of physiology, not as the ‘father of British Town Planning’ as he was to become. We explore his time here and the links he had both back to Charles Darwin and forward to Patrick Abercrombie. This is part of our wider quest to assess the impact of Geddes on evolutionary theory in the study of cities and planning of which we plan a more substantial paper which we will, in due course, post on this web site.

The first three Professors of Town Planning at University College London were the first three Professors of Civic Design at the University of Liverpool, and in fact they were the first three professors of planning in the UK. Insofar as there is any dynasty in the academy of town planning, it is here at UCL and of course at Liverpool. Stanley Adshead who was the first professor at Liverpool, where that department was founded in 1909, was brought to UCL to establish the department there in 1914 and his successor Patrick Abercrombie came from Liverpool to UCL in 1935, retiring in 1946. Then followed William Holford, professor there after Abercrombie and here until 1970 when the Liverpool dynasty ended with Richard Llewellyn-Davies taking the chair<sup>‡</sup>. In 1975, Gerald Smart was appointed and in 1991, Peter Hall. There is little doubt that these persons are individually important in the history of British Town Planning and their collective eminence suggests, at least somewhat tentatively, a rather different kind of dynasty.

This history, however, has deeper and less obvious foundations. In this vignette, we will summarise what we have learnt quite recently about the origins of town planning at UCL. Of course UCL was tiny in size in its first ten years, dominated by medicine, biology and philosophy, and the presence of the greats, notably Charles Darwin who lived adjacent to the college when he first married a couple of years after he came back from his voyage on the *Beagle*. From the end of 1838 to 1842, Darwin lived at

---

<sup>†</sup> The subtitle is an extract from Patrick Abercrombie’s observations on Patrick Geddes’ somewhat chaotic but deeply fascinating exhibit at the Town Planning Exhibition hosted by the Royal Academy in 1910. Quoted in P. Abercrombie (1933, 1959) **Town and Country Planning in Britain**, Home University Library, London (page 129, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition). We quote the entire piece in the text later.

<sup>‡</sup> see M. P. Collins (1989) A Review of 75 Years of Planning Education at UCL, **Journal of the Royal Town Planning Institute**, 75, 23<sup>rd</sup> June, 18-22.

10 Upper Gower Street, in time renamed 112 Gower Street, which was on the present site of the Darwin Lecture Theatre and the biological sciences building<sup>∅</sup>. His house still stood well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century until it was demolished by the Blitz in 1941 but whenever Darwin came to London through the years he lived in Kent, he saw his colleagues and friends in physiology at UCL. In fact he was the first honorary member of *The Physiological Society* in 1876 which was founded in the then Professor of Physiology Burdon Sanderson's drawing room<sup>±</sup>.

It is not widely known but it is reported in various publications about the history of the College that a one Patrick Geddes held the Sharpey Physiological Scholarship in the years 1877 to 1878. This scholarship had been founded for the contribution of William Sharpey who almost single handedly founded Physiology in Britain at UCL and who was professor from 1836 to his retirement in 1874 when Burdon Sanderson took over. Geddes who was 23 at the time and had no formal training to speak of, had entered Edinburgh University in 1874 to study botany. But in his first week, he was appalled by the prospect of dull, endless dissection and classification. In a show of bravado, one might even say recklessness that characterised much of his later life, he cut loose immediately and journeyed to London to attend Thomas Huxley's evening classes at the Royal School of Mines, now Imperial College, on science and biology after reading and being massively influenced by the debates about science, religion and evolution, popularised by Huxley. Geddes was enamoured of what was being talked of in biology and philosophy, of Darwin's contribution, and the controversy surrounding all that. He must have impressed himself on Huxley but due to his lack of formal qualifications was required to spend a preliminary year studying mining before he could enter Huxley's class which he did in 1875. At the end of three years in London of what must have been part time study, Huxley, his mentor, attempted to place him in more secure surroundings so that he could indulge his passion (and perhaps get a degree?). Cambridge came to nothing for Geddes felt it too cloistered and it was in the summer of 1877 that Huxley proposed him to Burdon Sanderson as a worthy recipient of the Sharpey Scholarship.

So Geddes who is widely regarded as the father of British Town Planning came to UCL in 1877 to begin his formal studies as a laboratory assistant to Burdon Sanderson. He only stayed a year, for in the spring of 1878 he fell ill and was advised to move away for a short break and again on Huxley's advice, he went to the marine biological station in Roscoff in Brittany where Henri de Lacaze-Duthiers from the Sorbonne took him under his wing. Geddes going to France was the decisive break for there he discovered the work of Le Play which fit his quirky but growing interest in social evolution. His love affair with France lasted his whole lifetime to his dying days in Montpellier and he never returned to study or work in London.

But what of London. His short year at UCL pushed him onto the path of publication as a biologist/botanist and by 1879 when he eventually returned to his home in Scotland (via a peculiar sojourn in Mexico), he had a small but respectable CV. But his lack of a degree and his peripatetic journey through life even at this point did not

---

<sup>∅</sup> N. Harte and J. North (2004) **The World of UCL, 1828-2004**, 3rd edition, UCL Press, London.

<sup>±</sup> There is considerable confusion as to the whereabouts of Burdon Sanderson's house; he may have had more than one. The house referred to was at 49 Queen Anne Street [see E. Sharpey-Schafer (1927) **History of the Physiological Society during its First Fifty Years, 1876-1926**, Cambridge University Press, London].

fit the emerging establishment mould. It is perhaps amazing to think that he applied for a chair of Zoology at Queen's College, Manchester in 1879 at the age of 25 only to miss it by a whisker if all reports are true. But his path was set. Although he continued to study biology (almost as his 'day job' in modern parlance), his was not a serious, sustained scientific interest because he spent much more time thinking as a sociologist and working as an activist becoming eventually what we now might call the 'first practical planning theorist'. Much is written about Geddes and it is not our intention to say more here for our concern in this note is from 1874 to 1878 which we might call the 'London years'.

It is clear that in London, Geddes learnt much at the feet of the masters. He became a skilled dissectionist and he was instituted into the hallowed halls of academia at least to the point where he understood how the academy worked<sup>◇</sup>. But the event on which this whole early history turns was noted in his book with J. A. Thomson (1931) **Life: Outlines of Biology** published towards the end of his own life when he recalled an experience in what must have been late 1877 or early 1878 in Burdon Sanderson's lab: in the third person, he (Geddes) says

was amusing a spare hour by searching a pond sample with his microscope and had drawn a comparative blank, with only two or three common green Euglenas swimming amid a few motile bacilli. He was about to put this slide away for a fresh dip, when he was gently pushed aside. A big beard came over his shoulder – here was Darwin! Who had come in unnoticed. He said nothing, but looked closely into this – to me – barren microscope: then suddenly broke out, positively shouting for joy: “ I say! There're moving, they're moving! Sanderson! Sanderson ! come and see; they're moving! Look at that!”

Was not here a vivid and memorable lesson in biology – this literally Pan-ic intoxication of ecstasy, in our oldest of veterans, greatest of masters, before this simplest spectacle of life!

So where exactly did Geddes meet Darwin and we believe that this was the only time they met, although a little later, they corresponded. It may be impossible to track down the place where Burdon Sanderson's lab was but it is most likely that this was in the main college, somewhere near the North Cloisters in the vicinity of the Old Refectory or the Housman Room, as suggested by Hale Bellot in his map of College buildings from 1826 to 1876<sup>+</sup>. This was just before the construction of the south, then north wings which changed the location of departments considerably. But it might have been elsewhere for Burdon Sanderson had a lab in one of his houses and the location of this particular house is not overly clear. It was either at 26 Gordon Square which is where the present History Department is or at 18 Howland Street (now renumbered) which is an extension of Capper Street across Tottenham Court Road. No matter. It is more likely that Geddes was in the main college and we will assume this in our quest to locate these links between the greats in time and space<sup>⊕</sup>.

---

<sup>◇</sup> P. Mairet (1957) **Pioneer of Sociology: The Life and Letters of Patrick Geddes**, Lund Humphries, London.

<sup>+</sup> H. H. Bellot (1929) **University College London, 1826-1928**, University of London Press, London.

<sup>⊕</sup> Geddes met others who were connected to him through UCL but were not related to his biological training. For example, in his time in India, he met Mahatma Gandhi who was in UCL in the late 1880s, and Raymond Unwin who popularised the garden suburb and lectured in Adshead's Department in the early 1900s. No doubt there were others which we will track as we continue our detective work.

You may well ask how all this relates to the wider history. Well superficially the dynasty of town planning professors did not begin until 1914 when the Town Planning department was founded and this was located at the end of the north wing somewhere near where the current Language Centre is, adjacent to the Slade. Of course the (Royal) Town Planning Institute was only founded in 1914 but Patrick Abercrombie and Patrick Geddes must have had a number of encounters before town planning was established at UCL as a professional activity. Indeed it is entirely possible that Abercrombie never even knew that Geddes was at UCL (although we judge this unlikely as they must have met several times in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and presumably conversed socially). But they were very different people as the following passage from Abercrombie when they met at the Town Planning Exhibition at Burlington House in 1910 makes clear: Abercrombie (see previous footnote †) says of Geddes' exhibit at the Exhibition:

“Within this den sat Geddes, a most unsettling person, talking, talking, talking – about everything and anything. The visitors could criticize his show – the merest hotch-potch – picture postcards – newspaper cuttings – crude old woodcuts – strange diagrams – archaeological reconstructions; these things, they said, were unworthy of the Royal Academy – many of them were not even framed – shocking want of respect; but if they chanced within the range of Geddes' talk, henceforth nothing could medicine them to the sweet sleep which yesterday they owned. *There was something more in town planning than met the eye!*” (pages 128-129, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1959; *our italics*).

At that point, neither Geddes nor Abercrombie would know how their lives might entangle across time and space for the Department of Town Planning had not yet been established at UCL. When it was, there was no sense in which Abercrombie could ever have thought he might end up there for he then spent 20 years or more as Professor at Liverpool before he made the journey south. In fact when Abercrombie eventually came to UCL, Geddes was dead and it had been 60 years since he, Geddes, had worked in a lab some 200 yards or so from Abercrombie's office. And at that point the dynasty referred to in the opening paragraph was only just forming. Moreover town planning was a very different movement from the social evolutionary perspective that Geddes had embarked upon in his London years, and it was a much younger, less established subject than physiology or any of the natural sciences. Indeed for many years and even now, its academic status is disputed.

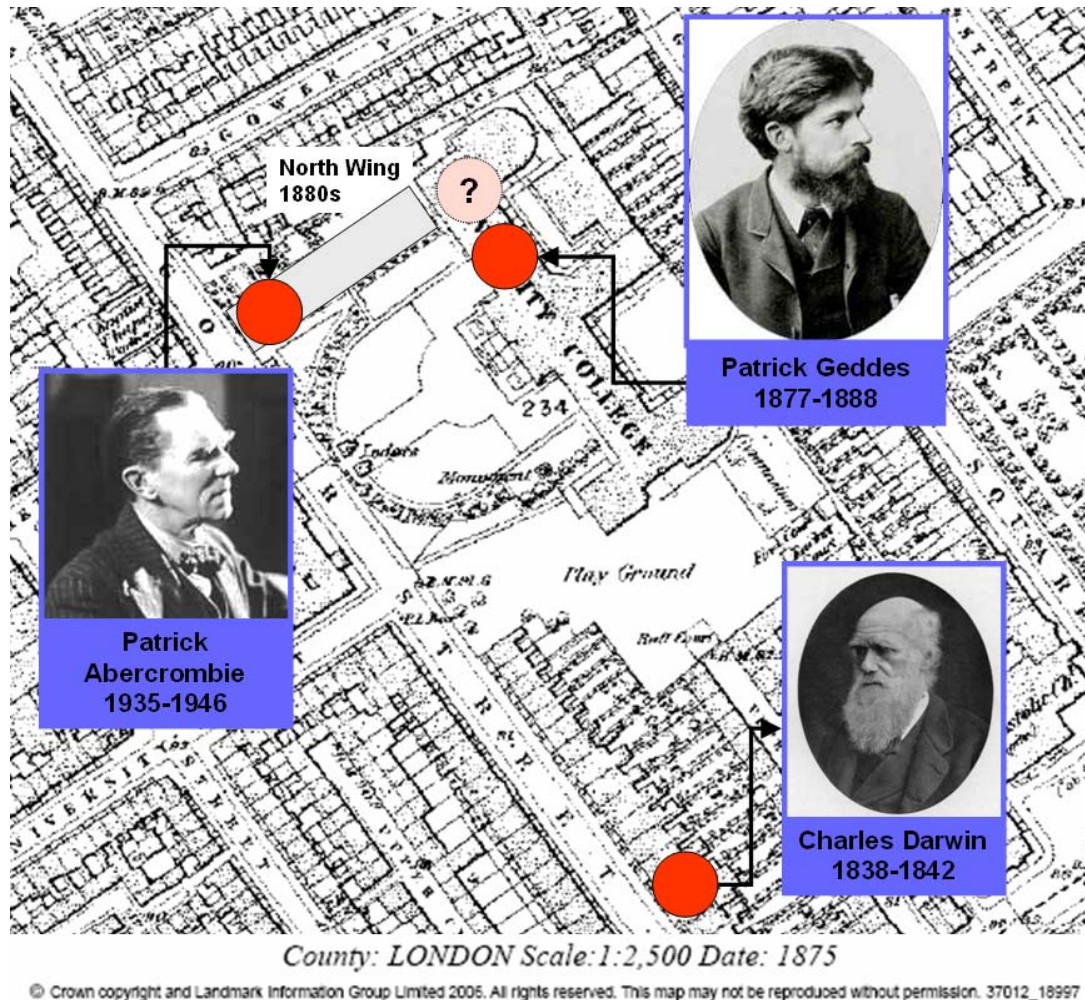
I hear you asking that apart from the fact that we can now be sure that Geddes was associated with UCL in rather a distinct way, what is the meaning of this early history? It is of interest of course to generations of town and regional planners that Geddes can be linked in this way for it does establish some coherence to the way town planning ideas developed. But Geddes' book *Cities in Evolution*<sup>†</sup> that was first published in 1914 is a pale shadow of the ideas that Darwin and others began. It is a rather idiosyncratic and paternalistic mix of reflections and exhortations about how society should plan better, albeit from the point of view very largely of the common man. It betrays a kind of vitalist tradition, much more deterministic and perhaps idealistic than the movement begun by Darwin which is now the dominant world view of the way life and even society evolve. But as an exploration of how evolution might influence the way we understand society and cities and more to the point, the way we might 'plan' them, Geddes' book is largely silent. The conundrum surrounding Geddes is that he was trained in evolution and aspired to its logic but he did little to

---

<sup>†</sup> P. Geddes (1915) **Cities in Evolution**, Williams and Norgate, London (new & revised edition, 1949).



force us to understand the world of cities in these terms. At least a superficial reading of his works implies this but there may be a deeper message and it is this we seek to interpret. None of this would be of any relevance if evolution were still of little consequence to town planning but in the last 40 years, we have seen a sea change in how we understand cities and evolutionary ideas are firmly on the agenda for refashioning the way we understand cities and the way we might plan them better.



Thus linking Darwin to town planning through Geddes has enormous contemporary significance and we do not think we would have searched out this history had this not been the case. This note is simply part of the context for a much more considered paper that we are writing under the tentative title of “Patrick Geddes, Cities, Evolution, and the Complexity Sciences” where we hope to trace the role of Geddes and his links to the theory of evolution in the light of our own work on theories of evolution and morphology in the planning of cities. There are many aspects of our new found interpretation of the world from the bottom up where elements that compose cities evolve comparatively independently so that the structures and forms that we call cities emerge from this soup. Fitness, emergence, mutation, and regeneration are all key features of this new way of looking at cities and it is clear that buried deep in Geddes’ book and his other writings are many themes that echo these ideas, tantalising so.

The conundrum is that Geddes was strongly influenced by Darwin but that this influence was not disseminated into modern British town planning as a direct force on its theory and practice. The notion of manipulating urban form of course which reflects town planning's strongly physicalist origins was widely agreed as the way planning could generate a better society but the way in which evolutionary theory worked and the extent to which it might be regarded as progressive in a social sense, does not really feature very much in Geddes' writings. In short, like so many people at the time and since, Geddes took evolution at its face value to mean how change occurs, how nature and society change, and he was less concerned about its mechanism. Of course, the focus on mechanism began after Darwin with Mendel, and notions about randomness, mutation, fitness and so on which define the genetic code belonged to a later era. Even Darwin who first posed this idea began to doubt it in his later years<sup>□</sup>. It is hard to blame Geddes for not laying bare a genetic code for cities and society when it has taken us more than 100 years to even sense that this might be the way forward. Yet Geddes' writings are enigmatic to say the least on many of these points. We feel his ideas about evolution which went well beyond Darwin now have greater resonance than at any time hitherto<sup>▽</sup>.

This then is our wider challenge – to trace the way Geddes through his writings shows a consistency with contemporary approaches to social science and cities and their planning which are reflected in the complexity sciences. Evolutionary theory is central to all of this but in assessing Geddes' contribution, it is almost as if the titling of his work using the term 'evolution' is a diversion, a wish more than reality in that the way he went about articulating town planning throughout his life implies a much stronger consensus with the rather elitist, top down, perhaps technocratic approach that dominated planning through much of the last century. This is the puzzle that we hope to throw some light upon and the fact that Geddes was at UCL as we are, is of much more than passing interest. Moreover it is nice to think that we might extend and redraw the map of the dynasty as ? ...Geddes ... → ...Adshead → Abercrombie → Holford → Llewellyn-Davies → Smart → Hall → but this is a pure indulgence and our quest is more noble, we hope!

*Acknowledgements: Michael Collins, Mike Edwards, Negley Harte, John North, Tim Biscoe, Tilli Tansey kindly responded to our queries in this piece of detective work.*

---

<sup>□</sup> D. R. Stoddart (1966) Darwin's Impact on Geography, **Annals of the Association of American Geographers**, 56 (4), 683-698.

<sup>▽</sup> It is arguable that Geddes' entire philosophy was grounded in a much wider interpretation of evolutionary theory than that associated with even the social evolutionists such as Spencer and Bergson but all we have are hints from his writings. For example, in **Cities in Evolution**, he says at one point: "...the city is more than a place in space, it is drama in time.", quoted in B. T. Robson (1981) *Geography and Social Science: The Role of Patrick Geddes*, in D. R. Stoddart (Editor) **Geography, Ideology and Social Concern**, Blackwell, Oxford, UK, pp. 197-207.