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Sorting in Patrick Geddes' Outlook Tower





In 1953, I was offered a small grant to spend three months at the Outlook Tower in Edinburgh, sorting the papers of Patrick Geddes (1834-1932, Scotsman, biologist, geographer, sociologist, regional and city planner, landscape gardener, professor and knight).

Students of city planning pick up a medley of facts about Geddes, one of the founders of our profession:

- He had synoptic vision (call it comprehensive overview plus insight).

- He believed in socio-evolution: Societies with “universal education” would improve their surroundings; these would upgrade society, which would then improve the surroundings, and so on.

- As a young man he had looked down from Kinnoull Hill upon his home town of Perth in the Tay Valley and cried “Eureka,” or whatever, “Folk – Work – Place.”¹ Geddes’ insight on the hill was about the interdependence of city and region: The latter supplied resources, routes and character; the city provided markets, work and services.

- The Outlook Tower was a disused observatory with a camera obscura when Geddes took it over in the 1890s and used it as a center for developing and spreading his ideas.

- Geddes had started the tradition of summer schools in Britain in the 1880s. In the evenings, Geddes’ scholars organized entertainments, dressing up and acting historical plays, and inspired him to write *The Masque of Learning*.

- Geddes lectured world-wide, prepared improvement reports and plans for cities in India, designed a university (not built) for the Zionist Commission in Jerusalem and founded the Scots College at Montpelier,

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The Outlook Tower on Edinburgh's skyline. View from Edinburgh Castle.

A visitor arriving in Edinburgh in the 1950s would have walked from Waverley Station (center) to Princes Street (right), an elegant, one-sided shopping street in the city's New Town. Photo courtesy Frederic Lewis.

France, where he spent his last years developing a more elaborate version of the Outlook Tower.

But this portrait has puzzling gaps and questions, upon which my sorting in the Outlook Tower would begin to shed light:

- How could Geddes ride so freely through academic disciplines, as though they were public property?
- I was in planning because towns are where most of us live, decent environments are a civilized idea and the countryside needed protection. But what inspired Geddes?
- What inspired the remarkable people who supported Geddes in his lifetime and those, later in Britain, who were a force in making town planning a public trust?

- Why did Geddes use the Survey Analysis Plan as a formula for city planning, which makes the process sound quick and easy when it is complex, difficult and time consuming? Planners in 1953 had to work for consensus, for example, through interdisciplinary teams comprising local administrators, committee members, powerful developers, the public and civil servants.
- What was the future role of the Outlook Tower?
- Was Geddes' notion about the interdependence of city and region still valid, considering the proliferation of cheap imports and the new, light, foot-loose industries?





Arrival

In the autumn of 1953, a traveler arriving in Edinburgh off the night train ate an early breakfast in Waverley Station, climbed the steps against a brisk wind off the Forth (“one overcoat colder” than London as the Scots like to say) and reached Princes Street, the most elegant eighteenth-century, one-sided shopping street in Europe. From this south edge of the New Town, built along an east–west ridge, shoppers could look across the Nor’ Loch (a glacial lake now drained and planted as a park) to the Old Town on a higher, steep-sided, east–west ridge. From the castle, on a volcanic crag at the west end of the ridge, to Holyrood Palace at the bottom, the buildings on the Royal Mile ran down along streets named Castlehill, Lawnmarket, High Street and Canongate.

An empty space, the parade ground, separates the castle from the first buildings on Castlehill; in the next block is the Outlook Tower, capped by a small dome rising above close-packed roofs, dwarfed by the spire of Tolbooth

St. John’s church farther down the street. The Outlook Tower is a six- and seven-story building; the crenellated parapet roof has projecting corner turrets and a domed octagonal tower on top. The first four floors had been part of two seventeenth-century town houses on narrow lots. The upper floors and the tower were added in the mid-nineteenth century when the town houses were made into an observatory.

Waiting at the door when I arrived was Eric Stevenson, a towering, fair-haired man, architect and senior planner at the Scottish Office. He was administering the Forbes Trust grants for Lady Whitson, my sponsor. I followed Stevenson fast up steep stone stairs to the Tower’s battlements, from which one could see Edinburgh spreading from the Pentland Hills north, over crags, troughs, valleys and the coastal plain to the Firth of Forth, a wildly romantic site.

The camera room in the octagon under the dome had a large, round table that was slightly dished in the center and occupied most of the room. Stevenson explained that a helicopter view of the city and the region could be projected onto the table and rotated; the Tower had been used by several groups during the recent Edinburgh Festival and the camera obscura had been very popular. He did not give a demonstration.

I had expected the Tower would be a workshop like Henry Ford’s bicycle shed or Madame Curie’s laboratory, but not much evidence remained from the Geddes era except the names of the large space on each floor: Edinburgh Room at the top, the World at the bottom. The only visible reminders of a Festival exhibition that had been in the Edinburgh room were browned photographs and engravings on the walls. A small side room had

Sketch of the Outlook Tower.
From Patrick Geddes, *Cities in Evolution*.

PLACE (Geography)	place-WORK	place-FOLK
work-PLACE	WORK (Economics)	work-FOLK
folk-PLACE	folk-WORK	FOLK (Anthropology)

feeling-SENSE	feeling-EXPERIENCE	FEELING
experienced-SENSE	EXPERIENCE	experienced-FEELING
SENSE	sensed-EXPERIENCE	sensed-FEELING

been used during the Festival as a stained glass artist's studio; tall, dark cupboards obscured the light and large glass pieces, difficult to move. This room had the air of a church vestry, an identity, in comparison to all the other spaces, except for a so-called kitchen (off what had been the Festival tea-room) that had a gas stove and a full bath in it.

Some of the Festival groups seemed to have left in a hurry, but the place was clean. Floors were covered with linoleum, the rough walls and ceilings with thin paper. The Scotland Room (beneath the Edinburgh Room) had a true-to-scale map of the country painted on the floor. Next below, the English Speaking Countries and the British Empire room was filled with boxes of papers and books on shelves. My workroom.

Stevenson gave me his office telephone number (the Tower had no phone) and some bulky keys, apologized for rushing off, shook hands and left. He had not explained what "sorting" meant.

I went over the premises again. I checked the locks on basement doors and windows, and the gas-taps, cleaned up in the makeshift kitchen (noting a mousetrap in a corner) and examined the views from my workroom windows. The front one looked into a stone canyon, Castlehill; the side one looked across Ramsay Lane, over a flat roof that might have been a covered reservoir and past Ramsay Garden (a block of apartments built as a Geddes initiative) to the parade ground and the castle. There was no desktop working space except a small desk, and there were no tables. I collected chairs from other floors and arranged them around the desk in a half circle, decided to work English hours (one o'clock lunch), opened the first box and dropped into the nineteenth century.

Sorting

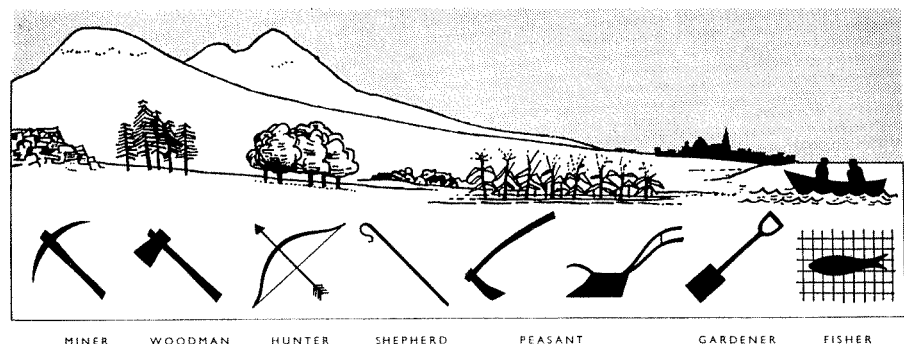
The jumble of papers in the box was of all kinds, all sizes; bound, loose, written, typed, printed; magazines, faded photographs, books. First I took out

A collection of Geddes images:

(Top) Geddes' synoptic PLACE - WORK - FOLK relationship depicted as a matrix.

(Bottom) Geddes' "Valley Section" is an icon depicting the interrelatedness of an urban area and its surroundings.

(Opposite page) Cover of a literary magazine published by Geddes and his associates.



MINER WOODMAN HUNTER SHEPHERD PEASANT GARDENER FISHER

the regional and city planning items: surveys, reports, diagrams, plans for cities in several countries; material from the second traveling International Town Planning Exhibition (the first was sunk by enemy action in World War I in the Indian Ocean); reprints of Geddes articles in professional journals; his book, *The Evolution of Cities*, and other books in the natural sciences, written with J. Arthur Thomson.

Then the art section. Arts and Crafts Movement; Art Nouveau; the Celtic Revival; old Gaelic songs collected from the Highlands and Island by Mrs. Kennedy Fraser; copies of *The Evergreen*, a prose and poetry quarterly, on thick, rough paper, published by Geddes and colleagues — there were only four numbers. Pictures of Pre-Raphaelite women and Rennie Mackintosh's School of Art, and his Tearooms in Glasgow.

Discovery! If the formula for a synoptic view of a city is FOLK – WORK – PLACE, then WORK means all activities, including the arts and crafts. The full formula is then: FOLK \rightleftharpoons ACTIVITIES \rightleftharpoons PLACE \rightleftharpoons CULTURE, or CIVILIZATION.

How to sort the nineteenth century philosophers? A natural dividing line was the 1858-59 intellectual earthquake, when Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace together read their theories of the evolution of species (independently conceived) before the Linnaean Society in London, then published them. (Geddes was 25.) The great Germans who founded modern geography — Immanuel Kant, von Humboldt and his student Carl Ritter — had finished their work before the earthquake. And by that time Auguste Comte (a name occurring often in the Tower — as a young man Comte had been secretary to the utopian Claude

Henri de Rouvroy, Comte de St. Simon) already had established a systematic social science, calling it sociology. He held that social phenomena can be scientifically described and that social science should be used in guiding sound social planning.

So by the time Darwin and Wallace's theories were published, the ground had been prepared for those who followed: the Alsatian René Durkheim; the Frenchmen Le Play,

THE 
EVERGREEN
 A NORTHERN SEASONAL



PUBLISHED
 IN THE LAWNMARKET OF EDINBURGH
 BY PATRICK GEDDES AND COLLEAGUES
 AND IN LONDON: BY T. FISHER UNWIN

Demolins and Vidal de la Blache; Elisée Reclus, a Belgian trained in Germany; and in England John Stuart Mill, John Ruskin, the Fabians and socialists, and Karl Marx. The air, as Linnaeus had said about insect hunters (a century ago in Latin), was full of talk. The earthquake had uncovered exciting new territory, which the philosophers were preparing to map and stake out.

Herbert Spencer's name was conspicuous among the papers, and difficult to catalogue. He treated all sciences as common ground, anticipated Darwin's theory of evolution and coined the saying "survival of the fittest." Then Prince Kropotkin, a

geographer, revolutionary, veteran of a Cossack regiment in Siberia and also a conservationist! Kropotkin, from his observations of mutual aid among higher animals, held that the Sociological Darwinists' justification of human greed, based on survival of the fittest, was wrong.

The road to the Ideal City did not run straight through the social sciences, apparently; it looped through natural science. For us working in 1953 in the planning department of a large city, nature impinged only during the week as parks and landscape, greenbelts far out, weather so foul we could not go on survey and biology at evening classes. The region, where you walked on weekends, was someone else's responsibility.

I has assumed that Geddes was Professor of Botany at Dundee for pragmatic reasons, but this short-sighted view changed at the Outlook Tower. It seemed that Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-95) was the key to the question of what inspired Geddes. Huxley was a natural scientist, philosopher and educator who believed in educating the whole individual. Age 35 when *The Origin of Species* was published, he defended it publicly against dissenting scientists and churchmen, opposed Victorians who quoted "Survival of the fittest" to justify greed and worked to apply Darwin's theory in the new science, which the German Ernst Haeckel had named "Ecology" in 1869.

As a first-year student, Geddes had abandoned botany in Edinburgh after one week and gone to unusual lengths to join Huxley's five-month intensive course in natural science at the Royal School of Mines in London; he was inspired and convinced by Huxley.²

It seems possible that Geddes built his theory of socio-evolution on the

ecological principle of progression, which would have been known to him and to Huxley before it became authorized writ. This principle holds that certain plants and animals live together in communities in certain places (children know which they are and where to find them); in time, these communities change (pioneer plants on disused farmland, for instance, give way to more mature species, then scrub, then trees); and at each stage, the sitting tenants improve conditions for their successors. This principle, combined with the possibilities suggested in the Theory of Evolution (and Geddes' belief in *universal* education as a factor in social evolution) could explain Geddes' optimism and his ability to persuade others to join him in the drive toward Ideal Cities.

But the prospects for building Ideal Cities were not encouraging. In Britain Geddes had little or no official support; the public did not assume responsibility for planning cities until 1947. In Geddes' time, a newly formed local government network had barely managed to take over the public workhouses, the sewers and the cleaning of town streets.

Reform work meant private means. Octavia Hill, in her efforts to improve the miserable conditions of the working classes, was being encouraged and partly financed by Ruskin, Cadbury and Lever; other enlightened industrialists had built civilized housing for their workers, who then did better work. Ebenezer Howard, in his spare time, was devising principles for garden cities which would be built on green sites, privately financed.

Geddes, a prophet, preacher, planning consultant and builder with entire old towns and cities as his subject, was supported by a few life-long friends, a changing band of young enthusiasts

and convincing local philanthropists. He kept clear of political and religious groups. He joined only those voluntary organizations that he could lead and when they ceased to attract support, or the members split on basic issues, he moved on — the choice of routes to socio-evolution was wide. His aims were never quite clear to others because his vision was continuously evolving as he synthesized ideas from observations and experiences, in light of philosophical theories appearing on both sides of the Atlantic. It was Geddes' vision and his drive that attracted and held his supporters.

The Improvements

Interruption. At one o'clock every day, the castle gun fired and shook the windows. Edinburghers checked their watches, and I went out to enjoy the Old Town and check on the Improvements. Geddes had returned to Scotland in the 1880s to be botany demonstrator in Edinburgh and lecturer in natural history in the School of Medicine. The university was in the Old Town, which was an overcrowded, overbuilt and unsanitary place: shabby, congested, slummy and breathtaking, with fine fifteenth- to eighteenth-century buildings combining Scottish engineering skills and French flair.

The Old Town had been built originally so that Scottish nobles could live near the court and its French connections. From the main axis along the back of the ridge, long thin lot lines at right angles, like a fringe, ran down the slopes; these narrow sites were permanent under Scots law whereby land was not sold to developers but leased in perpetuity at a fixed rent with binding conditions. As a result, the aristocrats' houses along the Royal

Mile were built very tall and deep and as the population grew, courts appeared on the backlands — dark six-story canyons with two extra stories on the lower slopes.

Around 1800, wealthy families began moving across the Nor' Loch to the New Town, leaving the historic center to rot. By the time Geddes returned, the Town Council had passed an Improvement Act and divided the old town into Improvement Areas.

Geddes and his new wife, Anna Morton, both already involved in the Improvement cause, created a sensation by settling in an apartment in a slum tenement in James Court. They were given the Lawnmarket Area to improve, in a remarkably loose arrangement, apparently unfinanced. They restored their apartment and with the help of friends and eager students, went on to buy and restore others in the building and then other tenements, which became halls of residence for university students. Meanwhile, Geddes undertook the building of Ramsay Garden, a highly romantic apartment group alongside the Castle Esplanade, intended as a town and gown hall of residence and flats.

Keele

Stevenson had told me there was material in other places where Geddes had worked. The aim was to bring as much of it as possible into the Tower. Records from Geddes' association with the British Sociological Society had been moved from London during World War II to the home of the retired secretary in the Midlands, and they were being passed on to the University of Keele. Stevenson asked me to visit these two places.

I went down to the Midlands, first to the small market town of Ledbury

and the home of Alexander Farquharson, who had worked with Geddes and Branford in London for years as secretary of the Sociology Society. Mrs. Farquharson showed me a tea chest with about 10 cubic feet of loose papers in it that had been collected from one of their London buildings during World War II, I think she said after it had been bombed. The Farquharsons had several similar chests and were sorting and passing the papers on to the university; some had already gone but the work was slow.

At Keele a librarian showed me, in a dark passage, a row of tea chests with the familiar mix-up of papers. I asked how they were going to catalogue them and she said they were waiting for someone to be appointed to do the

work. It might take a year or more.

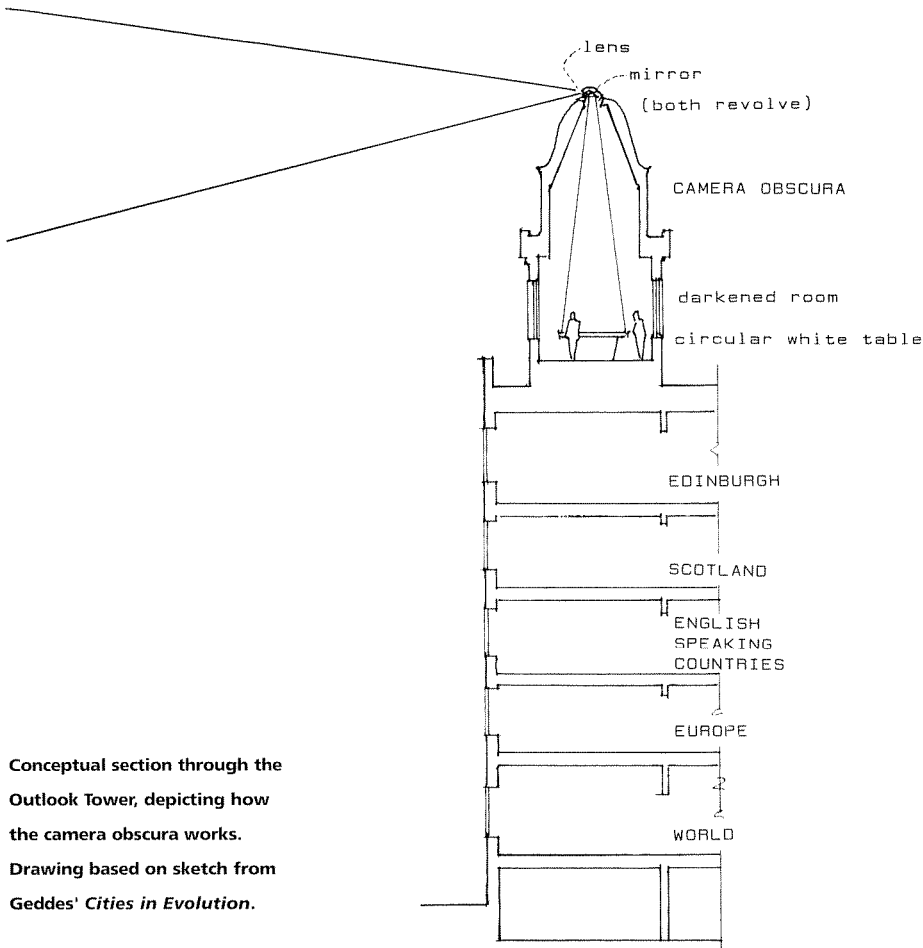
The Midlands trip settled two queries. First, the curious response of social scientists when asked for advice. For example, architects working under pressure on a public housing scheme ask scientists whether main doors should be placed to face across a street or be staggered to avoid housewives confronting each other. One scientist says, "We haven't done our research on that one yet. Sorry." Another says the same and goes on to give all the advice she can from her experience.

British sociologists apparently were divided between purists, who saw society as research material (they quoted Comte, one of the nineteenth-century founders of the discipline, who wrote, "social phenomena can be sci-

**The view from the
Outlook Tower.**

Photo courtesy Peter Hall.





Conceptual section through the Outlook Tower, depicting how the camera obscura works. Drawing based on sketch from Geddes' *Cities in Evolution*.

entifically observed and reduced to laws”) and those who thought “social science should be used in improving the human condition” (also quoting Comte). Like the latter, Geddes put need ahead of purity and used his experience, *faute de mieux*.

The second point was the role of an Outlook Tower. At Keele, Geddes would be catalogued as a sociologist; in the university records at St. Andrews and Edinburgh and at the Roscoff Marine Station, he would be considered a biologist. In our profession, he was a regional and city planner. The Synthesizer was being taken apart. *An outlook tower is a symbol of synthesis.*

Boys

Arriving in Edinburgh off the night train, sky shining, wind fresh, it was wonderful to be back! I took a flag out of the theatricals chest and out onto the battlements and hauled it up. A

blast sent it rattling and slapping across the street, over the roofs, half-way to St. John’s steeple before I could haul it back. Celebration postponed.

An English friend who was subsidizing my grant with home comforts had four boys. Would they like to visit the Tower to see the camera obscura? They came, ate rolls with soft drinks, climbed to the battlements, checked the view and went into the octagon.

Working the camera obscura was more or less like milking a cow in a cinema. The boys were surprised to see on the table cars scuttling along Princes Street, the castle rock with the city wrapped around it, grey terraces stretching to the Forth, the Fife mountains beyond, more terraces rotating to Arthur’s Seat and Calton Hill. After identifying their school they were eager to explore the tower.

An acquaintance who had been passing on Castlehill at the time said afterwards she thought school classes

were rehearsing historical plays: Campbells trouncing McDonalds, Scots trouncing English, Members of the government fighting the opposition on the floor of the House, rich fighting poor, private interests fighting public, nature fighting the unnatural, giant firms fighting planners... . The one o’clock cannon exploded, the tumult stopped, boys tore downstairs, shook hands, thanked me for a super time and vanished. For boys, as for George Bernard Shaw, every drama must present a conflict; society and the city are a battleground, naturally.

By degrees, the British public had been making itself more responsible for city planning. Legislative changes in 1947 gave local authorities control over construction and over major changes in the use of (for the first time) *all* land in the country, except war department land and farms and forests remaining intact. (Property owners who lost value as a result could claim compensation up to a set date.)

But for city hall to exercise its power responsibly, the public must be fully informed, using Geddes’ terms, about the folk, place and work (activities) that together equal culture. Local government departments have in their files comprehensive information — surveys — of their area made by qualified teams for staff and elected members to use. For practical reasons, this mass of documents is not generally available to the public.

At the Outlook Tower, the Geddes group had made its own place where citizens could study themselves and their culture in detail. At times it is still that kind of place, when Edinburghers fill it with their festival, when boys find their school with the camera obscura. The work of researching and presenting survey material was then and is now a learning process.

The public today could make its own surveys — children, college students, voluntary societies and retired groups could do the work with professional guidance. The Outlook Tower, then, was and should be a place for working on data, for filing and exhibiting it for debate and discussion. It needs meeting rooms and a cafe.

Meanwhile at city hall today the modern departments are analyzing and correlating their survey data — diagnosing problems, shortages, injustices, past failures, needs; noting trends, potentials and resources unused; then hammering out, coordinating policies and plans for the city and its people for the next few years. The mechanisms whereby citizens in a democracy are systematically involved in this hammering process are not yet worked out. When they are, the words “outlook tower” in a city might symbolize the public’s place in that process.

Mice

The sorting went on and overnight the temperature dropped to three overcoats colder in the Tower. I thought I must stop work or get permission to install some kind of heating. Meanwhile, a ragged hole had appeared in the thin paper covering the workroom ceiling, as though it had been hit by a tall lance. I searched the building; nothing was out of place. Then a heater arrived and it worked.

I went back to sorting and after some time had an eerie feeling I was not alone. At a respectful distance in the half-circle of warmth on the floor sat two mice. They were cold and hungry, and probably had come into the Tower to scavenge crumbs. They were trying to eat old paste on the ceiling paper when one fell through.

The mice and I were the only living

creatures in this place. We were relatives from way back — family, more or less. Paper-eating mice are a problem and I was responsible for the Geddes papers, but murder was not in my contract. I could trap them live and ask the Edinburgh zoo (early landscaping by Geddes’ daughter, Lady Mears) to keep them. The zoologists there did not study house mice.

Two years later, as a planner in the Scottish office, I would have telephoned the Edinburgh Nature Conservancy down the street about the mice. A scientist would have said, (they almost always did) “We haven’t done research on that one yet,” and go on to make practical, ecologically sound suggestions. It was not their job to give civil servants informal advice, but they were responsible people.

Geddes might have found a role for the mice in the same spirit as he recognized and promoted the street sweepers in India — he gave them a place in the civic street processions and plots of land on which in rotation they composted street sweepings and grew vegetables.

House mice suggest the connection between zoologists and sociologists: Society is not exempt from natural laws; our town is a product of raw materials — the stones in the streets, our food, our energy, brains and beauty. Cities and regions are still interdependent even though the scale has changed; our region may be the planet and our cities, following Geddes, may be Madras, Jerusalem, or New York. We are working, heaven help us, on the science of civilization.

The Outlook Tower may be a metaphor for intellectual co-operation, or it may be a center set up by the people of a city/region for learning, teaching and debating, with information lines to all other institutions in

the area but independent — a center for exchanging ideas and intentions about the community, the place and the future, so that elected representatives have a clearer idea of what they represent. An Outlook Tower, you might say, is another step on the way to improving the design of democracy.

Notes

1. False. It was Le Play, an engineer, economist and sociologist, who coined the saying “*Lieu Travail Famille*”; Geddes adapted it in his acrostic-type thinking devices and in his lectures as, depending on the audience, “Place Work Folk,” “Environment Function Organism,” or “Geography Economics Anthropology.”
2. After leaving London, Geddes continued research in the natural sciences. He wrote and lectured on biology throughout his life and with J. Arthur Thomson produced several books: The first, *The Evolution of Sex*, caused a sensation in 1889; the last, *Life: Outlines of General Biology*, was published in 1931.
3. An excellent biography with full bibliographic lists is Helen Miller, *Patrick Geddes, Social Evolutionist and City Planner* (London: Routledge, 1990). Guides to Edinburgh architecture are C. McKean, *Edinburgh: An Illustrated Architectural Guide* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1983) and Gifford, McWilliams, Walker and Wilson, *The Buildings of Scotland, Edinburgh* (New York: Penguin, 1985).