Patrick Geddes as Social Ecologist: A lineage of resilience thinking in regional and urban planning.

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Abstract

The Scottish polymath Patrick Geddes (1854-1932) is attributed a broad range of expertise including evolutionary biologist, ecologist, conservationist and town planner. Geddes was specifically interested in the interaction of man and his environment at the local and global scale, and clearly articulated an understanding of the relationships within and between ecosystems and social systems. Geddes considered the ultimate expression of the relationship between man and nature to be the city in its region and Geddesian thinking resonates with many issues that are the focus of the contemporary discourse on social-ecological resilience in cities, such as resource depletion, social inequity, urban sprawl, and biodiversity loss. In 1924 Geddes established the Collège des Écossais in Montpellier in order to provide a living representation of his life’s work.

The paper will suggest, from an examination of his life’s work, that Patrick Geddes was a pioneer of social-ecological resilience thinking. The paper will explore how the often radical societal transformations and ideas in Geddesian thinking might enlighten the concept of urban resilience as a response to the convergence of crises facing society and the planet today. To this end the paper will set out a series of annotations, each linking core aspects of Geddesian thinking to concepts within social-ecological systems and resilience thinking. For example, the annotations will include examination of the relationship between Geddes’ ‘thinking machine’ entitled The Notation of Life and The Adaptive Cycle of social-ecological systems, The Valley Section and Panarchy, The Regional and Historical Survey (Geddes, 1915) and Assessing Resilience in Social-Ecological Systems: Workbook for Practitioners (Resilience Alliance, 2010). The paper will discuss the limits and potentials of such comparative studies, and how Geddesian thinking might help resolve identified deficiencies of resilience thinking when applied to urban planning.

The paper will therefore demonstrate that Geddesian thinking is still very relevant a full century later, revealing a lineage of resilience thinking in regional and urban planning that broadens and strengthens the contemporary debate on the transition to resilient cities and city regions. The paper will reflect on how Geddes’ original and creative thinking can inform new roles and paradigms for governance, practice and education in order to stimulate positive transformational change, and more equitable, appropriate and resilient urban and social development paths.

Keywords: Geddes, social, ecological systems, development, panarchy, urban resilience, transformation

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