Town Planning

Kermit C. Parsons and David Schuyler, eds.
From Garden City to Green City: The Legacy of Ebenezer Howard

Volker M. Welter
Biopolis: Patrick Geddes and the City of Life

Ebenezer Howard (1850–1928) and Patrick Geddes (1854–1932) are better known as authors of impassioned treatises and striking diagrams than as prolific urban designers. Although Howard worked as a stenographer in London and Geddes was initially trained in Scotland as a biologist, both were deeply influenced by social reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While Howard and Geddes shared the belief that new urban forms could inspire cooperative social and spiritual transformation, they proposed somewhat different paths for resolving tensions between the city and the country, between past and present built forms, and between social practices and physical environments. From Garden City to Green City: The Legacy of Ebenezer Howard, a collection of essays edited by Kermit C. Parsons and David Schuyler, and Volker Welter’s Biopolis: Patrick Geddes and the City of Life show the divergences between these two figures while confirming their significance to modern urban planning.

Whereas From Garden City to Green City adds to a voluminous literature addressing Ebenezer Howard and the garden city tradition, Biopolis fills a substantial gap in existing accounts of early-twentieth-century urban planning. Welter’s volume provides the first comprehensive synthesis and critical analysis of Geddes’s urban theories. His admirably detailed study draws on an impressive array of sources, from the planner’s letters and published writings to often overlooked documents including notes and unpublished manuscripts as well as the drawings, sketches, and diagrams that, as Welter convincingly demonstrates, were key tools in the consolidation of Geddes’s ideas. Previous work has focused on Geddes’s role as a leading voice in the town-planning movement and the author of such concepts as “conservative surgery” and “conurbation,” but has not critically examined his overall conception of cities as forms of life. By contrast, Biopolis exhaustively analyzes Geddes’s theories, relating them to contemporaneous philosophical discussions, architectural proposals, and urban planning debates, in order to argue for their historical relevance and import. The wealth and range of material Welter examines is balanced by the clear structure of his argument; each chapter carefully builds on the reader’s growing knowledge of the theories under discussion.

Beginning with an overview of Geddes’s intellectual foundations and a detailed analysis of his most famous diagrammatic “thinking machine,” titled “The Notation of Life,” Welter outlines the key influences on and basic terms of Geddes’s understanding of the city and his approach to what he termed “city design.” Welter argues that his early training in biology was critical to his historicist, evolutionary model of the city, which bridged fin-de-siècle materialist and transcendentalist positions. As Welter explains, for Geddes, the city is “the most distinct form that human life can take; even more, it is the form human life should take, especially in its highest development as cooperative and communal life” (11). Following this conception of the city as the most advanced evolutionary expression of human life, Geddes adopted the French sociologist Frédéric Le Play’s categories of lieu, travail, and famille (which he translated as “place,” “work,” and “folk”) to form the framework for his analysis of the interrelation between social practices and environmental forms. As expressed in “The Notation of Life,” the successful transformation of a town into a city would result from a dialectical synthesis between thought and action involving both individual reflection and communal activity.

Throughout the balance of the book, Welter examines the three levels on which he understands Geddes’s notion of city design operates: the geographical, the historical, and the spiritual. Beginning with geography, Welter investigates Geddes’s valley section diagram as a means of categorizing physical characteristics of the landscape in terms of the types of settlements and social activities (or occupational groups) that they accommodate. The spatial and symbolic hierarchies expressed in the valley section diagram thus form the theoretical foundation for his more familiar concepts: the region-city and the conurbation, which frame the city in terms of broader geographical and social networks. While Geddes’s emphasis on the region-city has often been characterized as his most important contribution to urban planning, Welter argues that rethinking the city on the scale of the region is not a novel idea in itself. What interests Welter is how Geddes made the region-city into a new universal framework for conceptualizing the relationship between inhabitants and their environment as dynamic and interactive.

As Welter explains, Geddes’s geographical mappings not only imagine social and physical structures in relation to one another, but they simultaneously express a particular vision of history. According to this view, a thorough grasp of a given city’s evolution over time and its resulting genius loci are necessary preconditions for formulating future development. At the same time, Geddes insists that institutions within the city, such as his proposed outlook towers, should actively encourage not merely the preservation of history but also, and most important, the ongoing development of living civic memory. Welter
cogently explores the relationship between the city in history and history in the city suggested by these interlocking impulses, tracing the roots of Geddes's theories in the ideas of Plato, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Henri-Louis Bergson. Unfortunately, even as Welter gestures to the intellectual sources of this model of history, he shies away from a substantive examination of Geddes's interest in creating morphological genealogies of the city as the foundation for future urban proposals. Welter's focused appraisal would have much to gain from a broader consideration of similar predilections evident in the work of a wide range of twentieth-century urban theorists and planners, from Marcel Poète to Ludwig Hilberseimer. As Welter describes it, Geddesian urban theory is based on an essentially teleological structure whereby proposals for a city's future development are determined through the anticipatory rereading of its past. What remains unexplored by Welter is the extent to which such an understanding of history and evolutionary development must be seen as foundational to the modern practice and theory of urban planning as a whole.

That Welter does not clearly locate Geddes in relation to other urban planners' investments in history and evolutionary theory is all the more surprising given that in the following section in Biopolis he takes great pains to elaborate Geddes's metaphysical concerns within a broader context. The author's discussion of the spiritual aspects of Geddesian theory—expressed in formal and symbolic terms by the temple and the cultural acropolis—directly follows an extended examination of temple forms found in a wide range of contemporaneous architectural and urban proposals. Arguably, the major contribution of Biopolis is Welter's excavation of the often overlooked importance of spiritual and metaphysical thought to debates regarding modern urban planning. Here the relationship between Geddes's theory and concrete urban proposals and practices are most intriguingly elaborated, from Welter's analysis of the Greek acropolis as an exemplary model for the modern city to his fascinating discussion of Geddes's interest in the city as communal performance, exemplified in the tableaux vivants and civic pageants he orchestrated. In these final sections, Welter links the strands of his analyses to elucidate the theorist's vision of the city "not simply as an accumulation of buildings, of space, or of people" but, in Geddes's own words, a "community as an integrate, with material and immaterial structures and functions" (241).

At points, the connections between the theories of Geddes and the traditions of intellectual, social, and planning history that Welter invokes remain ambiguous. Welter tends to juxtapose general discussions of historical developments with detailed analyses of Geddes's proposals without clearly articulating the connective tissue between them or, more important, the wider significance of these resonances. For instance, in his discussion of "the metaphysical imperative" shared by a wide range of architects and planners in the early twentieth century, Welter categorizes a diverse range of projects as "temples," grouping together buildings with a clear religious function with structures whose spiritual import is less literal or explicit. Even so, he provides a compelling, synthetic explanation of Geddes's theory that the planner himself never elaborated. Welter convincingly argues that, far from an isolated and idiosyncratic figure on the margins of early-twentieth-century developments in urban planning, Geddes represents a critical lynchpin between late-nineteenth-century debates regarding the city and more familiar modernist visions like those of Bruno Taut. In this way, Geddesian theory suggests a provocative model for linking what historians of modern architecture have generally characterized as the opposing poles of scientific and spiritual investments.

Whereas Welter's project largely focuses on his subject's relationship to contemporaneous debates, From Garden City to Green City investigates the influence Ebenezer Howard's notion of the garden city has had on subsequent developments. This volume grew out of a conference organized in 1998 by the late Kermit C. Parsons that was intended to "assess the impact of Howard's ideas on the shape of the twentieth-century city and their relevance for urban and regional planning as well as for environmental planning in the new century" (9). While the essays are uneven, they present a wide range of approaches to and assessments of the garden city legacy, from Howard's most influential formulation of his ideas in Garden Cities of Tomorrow (London, 1902) to current debates regarding sustainable planning.

Following a biographical essay, nine essays trace the importance of the garden city model to later proposals, including those of Patrick Geddes, which are examined in a chapter by Pierre Clavel, whose overly generalized conclusions would have greatly benefited from Welter's work. Important themes emerge from this collection, including the significance of boundaries to the garden city ideal and its successors, the interest inspired by Howard in rethinking the organization of housing and communities as well as the relationship between human settlements and the natural environment, and the problem of adapting theoretical models to different sites. While some chapters feature close historical analysis (such as Mervyn Miller's examination of the neighborhood unit and Parsons's detailed charting of the circulation of Clarence Stein's ideas between Britain and the United States), others offer broad-ranging comparisons across the twentieth century (including Robert Freestone's investigation of greenbelts and Eugenie L. Birch's sweeping study of five generations of the garden city). In this way, the volume seems at points to dramatize the seemingly divergent interests of historians and planners. By contrast, connections between the garden city and New Urbanism provide a thread that unites historical and practical considerations, as is evident in essays by Freestone and Birch, as well as William Fulton's study.
of this subject, Robert Fishman’s discussion of the bounded city, and Robert F. Young’s engaging analysis of green cities.

While Stephen Ward’s concluding essay provides an incisive, critical engagement with Howard’s ideas, several of the preceding chapters do not critically assess the garden city model or clearly define the terms they adopt. The tendency to reduce the garden city to series of formal elements creates, at points, a reductive vision of Howard’s project. Most significantly, Howard’s commitment to new approaches to financing and communal land ownership receives relatively little coverage. The lack of attention devoted to the social concerns and cooperative aims at the heart of the garden city project is particularly glaring in Birch’s optimistic depiction of Celebration, Florida, which smooths over the gulf between Disney’s corporate vision and Howard’s communal ideals. Perhaps, then, this anthology is most effective in demonstrating the ways in which Howard’s garden city has been reshaped almost beyond recognition. While the outright contradictions between claims made by different authors are striking, they suggest that there remains much room for further debate over the garden city’s past and future.

From Garden City to Green City ends on a surprising note, with Stephen Ward provocatively asserting that “the most telling feature of the Howard legacy is that a majority of the world’s city dwellers remain completely disinherited from it” (244). Our understanding of the garden city would have greatly benefited from more examination of why it has had seemingly limited appeal or application beyond the Anglo-American context that forms the focus of this study. Elsewhere in the volume, it is suggested that elements of the garden city ideal, particularly the greenbelt, have been exported around the world “through colonial and postcolonial networks of decision-making and influence” (77), although this phenomenon likewise remains unexplored. The dearth of substantive engagement with Howard’s legacy in global terms is regrettable, particularly given the growing literature addressing this topic. Furthermore, while Biopolis and From Garden City to Green City emphasize the explicitly universalizing terms of Geddes’s and Howard’s visions and make passing reference to imperialist thought and colonial development in relation to their subjects, analysis of these issues would have provided a richer understanding of the legacies of modern town planning in terms of both the circulation of urban forms and their ideological significance.

Nevertheless, both books will interest readers well beyond those with a specific interest in Geddes or Howard. While historians and practitioners of urban planning will appreciate the insights of From Garden City to Green City, Welter’s Biopolis is rewarding reading for anyone who follows the debates surrounding the development of the modern city. Both publications contribute to a more nuanced understanding of these theorists by examining the networks of influence that helped shape their ideas and their impact on subsequent urban planners. Given their celebrated status as utopian visionaries, Howard and Geddes underscored in their work an essential aspect of twentieth-century urbanism, that is, the potential gap between conception and implementation, and thus between theory and practice. While Welter criticizes Geddes for the unresolved distance between his ideas and their manifestation, the essays collected in From Garden City to Green City suggest the opposite problem in the case of Howard: that the garden city ideal was too easily manipulated and ultimately compromised by Howard’s failure comprehensively to articulate his vision.

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Notes
1. While previous studies of Patrick Geddes discuss his ideas and proposals for urban transformations, they do not provide sustained, critical analysis of his wide-ranging interventions in the then-fledgling field of urban planning. See Philip L. Boardman, Patrick Geddes: Maker of the Future (Chapel Hill, 1944); and Helen Meller, Patrick Geddes: Social Evolutionist and City Planner (London and New York, 1990).
2. The French archivist, historian, and urban theorist Marcel Poite is a particularly intriguing figure in this regard, given his prolonged interest in evolutionary theory and its relationship to urban development as well as his influential role in the early institutionalization of urbanism in France. Such concerns occupy many of his extensive writings, including Formation et évolution de Paris (Paris, 1910); “Les Lèdes bergonniennes et l’urbanisme,” in Mélanges Paul Negrelo (Bucharest, 1935); Introduction à l’urbanisme. L’Évolution des villes, la leçon de l’antiquité (Paris, 1937); and Paris. Son Évolution créatrice (Paris, 1938). For an overview of Poite’s work, see Donatella Calabri, “Marcel Poite: Pioneer of ‘L’urbanisme’ and Defender of ‘L’histoire des villes,’” Planning Perspectives 11 (1996), 413–36. Welter mentions the work of Ludwig Hilberseimer in the conclusion to Biopolis (252–53), but he does not discuss Hilberseimer’s approach to constructing morphological genealogies of urban forms. Welter has, however, investigated these issues in his essay “Everywhere at Any Time: Lewis Mumford, Ludwig Hilberseimer, and the Genealogy of the Modern City,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Architectural Historians, Richmond, Virginia, April 2002.