

SECTION I – THEORIES, IDEAS AND FORERUNNING
EXPERIENCES

BIOREGIONAL FUNDAMENTALS AS
TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT MODELS

The roots of the urban bioregion in the thinking of Patrick Geddes: from knowledge to citizens' involvement to build a new living¹

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Abstract

The urban bioregion model is deeply anchored in the Geddesian thought. In this contribution I will define those elements of Geddes thought that I consider fundamental for the definition of the bioregional approach: the (contextual) critique of a model of settlement and development, the personality of place as the foundation of self-sustainable development, an inter-connected and multi-disciplinary vision of the science of territory, real “eutopias” and the proactive role of the inhabitants in their construction. I will illustrate these four points and argue their links with bioregional approaches following the red thread mainly represented by Geddes’ essays, referring in particular to “Cities in Evolution” and to the reports from India.

In the light of this reading, I will conclude this contribution through the identification of some possible progress to be made in the urban bioregionalism approach, in order to proceed on the path of action-research outlined by Geddes: a renewed consideration of the role of historical territorial heritages which “self-sustainability” should be read not only in environmental terms but also in economic and social ones; a new glance on the city, with particular reference to the built fabric of the entire city and, moreover, of that affected by marginalization process.

KEYWORDS: co-evolution, territorial belonging, personality of place, visual thinking

¹ I am very grateful to Ada Macchiarini Paba for giving me access to some of the volumes of the “Fondo Giancarlo Paba”, even before its official opening within the Library of Scienze Tecnologiche of the University of Florence, which now hosts it. These texts have been essential to me in writing this contribution.

1. Introduction

The term bioregion appears in the American context in some texts produced by exponents of the ecological movement between the 1960' and 1970', such as Peter Berg, Judy Goldhaft, Gary Snyder (BERG, 2016, 10-11). For these authors, the bioregion is a geographic sphere endowed with specific physiographic features on which the anthropic component has grafted itself and developed a specific “consciousness” (*ivi*, 27) to inhabit it. In the 80', the bioregion is further specified by authors like Nancy Jack e John Todd and Kirkpatrick Sale as a “region governed by nature”, while Murray Bookchin emphasises above all the character of self-governed community area.

However, the urban bioregion has its roots in a much older tradition that can find a particularly complete synthesis in the work of Patrick Geddes. His influence on the territorialist approach has been highlighted, among others², by Mike Small in an essay from 2007 dedicated to the legacy of Geddes in Cyprus, in Catalonia, Japan and Italy (SMALL, 2007). In Italy, Small writes, in the fields of architecture and urbanism, Alberto Magnaghi³embodies the figure in which this influence is most evident. The aspects of the territorialist approach which match better the Geddesian one are (SMALL, 2007, 50-51): the tension towards a planning theory based on the identity of places and on a model of “self-sustainable local development”; the individualization of social players to be mobilized (through interactive planning) as energies for the realisation of the above-mentioned model; the dialectic between local and global and between identity and differences in a rapidly evolving context. Mike Small references are mainly “The Urban Village” (MAGNAGHI, 2005) and the New Municipality Network (Rete del Nuovo Municipio), respectively a book and a collection of experiences in which the bioregionalist evolution of the territorialist approach is present *in nuce*.

Actually, the urban bioregion model is deeply anchored in the Geddesian thought (MAGNAGHI, 2020, 147, 151). In this contribution I will define those elementsof Geddes thought that I consider fundamental for the born of bioregional approach. They are:

- the (contextual) critique of a model of settlement and development;
- the personality of place as the foundation of self-sustainable development;
- an inter-connected and multi-disciplinary vision of the science of territory;

² On the topic of the Geddesian influence on the patrimonial and bioregional approach, please see PABA 2010, SARAGOSA 2005 and 2011, PAQUOT 2017, FANFANI, PERRONE 2019.

³ The other two figures cited by Mike Small are Giancarlo De Carlo and Gian Carlo Magnoli (SMALL 2007, p.48).

- real “eutopias” and the proactive role of the inhabitants in their construction.

I will illustrate these four points and argue their links with bioregional approaches following the red thread mainly represented by Geddes’ essays, referring in particular to “Cities in Evolution” and to the reports from India. In the light of this reading, I will conclude this contribution through the identification of some possible progress to be made in the urban bioregionalism approach, in order to proceed on the path of action-research outlined by Geddes.

2. The (contextual) critique of a model of settlement and development

The urban bioregion was born as an alternative model to the “eco-catastrophic planetary urbanism” one (MAGNAGHI, 2014, 40), based on the diffusion of disproportionated settlements compared to the corresponding agroforestry territory, products, and at the same time producers of delocalized economies, harmful to both the environment and the inhabitants. The bioregional spatial model assumes a radical change, not limited only to the spatial component but also involving economic and social change. This circularity between change in the settlement, production and social model is the first element of the urban bioregionalist approach that we can closely relate to the Geddesian vision.

Geddes’ starting point for criticizing the settlement model of his time is, in fact, a contestation of its productive model: “we make it our prime endeavour to dig up coals, to run machinery, to produce cheap cotton, to clothe cheap people, to get up more coals, to run more machinery, and so on; and all this essentially towards ‘extending markets’. The whole has been essentially organised upon a basis of ‘primary poverty’ and of ‘secondary poverty’ (GEDDES, 1915, 74). But these mechanisms, Geddes continues, do not bring with them the development of a “real wealth” (*ibid.*), which is reflected in appropriate cities and places. This is the model of the “Cacotopy”, devoid of aesthetic quality due to its environmental and social malfunctioning, a typical product of the “Paleotechnic” era. Geddes calls for the transition to a new “Neotechnic” order firmly anchored in a progressive vision (which technological advances themselves will contribute to create). This new order will allow the preservation of resources, instead of their dissipation, and the construction of a better living environment.

Geddes’ posture is therefore highly political as it cannot disregard structural factors underlying a specific spatial model. To some extent, he could also be

considered as belonging to that “urbanism without a model” codified by Françoise Choay (CHOAY, 1965) and which included radically political figures such as Marx and Engels⁴: it was useless and impossible for them to propose a model for the physical re-organization of the city since only the proletarian revolution could lay new foundations for the construction of a new city. However, Patrick Geddes’ political approach clearly shows the influence of other important exponents of the anarchist current of his time: Peter Kropotkin, closer to Geddes in his libertarian spirit compared to the authoritarian Marx (as per Lewis Mumford’s observation, 1947, p. 12), amongst the first, and Elisée Reclus, who both took part in the Edinburgh Summer Schools (MACLEAN, 2004, 93; MACDONALD, 2004, 76).

Which settlement scenario arises from such a strong contestation of the industrial (for Geddes) and neoliberal (for the urban bioregionalist approach) models of development? A new city capable of re-establishing that condition of “contact and co-operation” (GEDDES, 1947, 28) with the rural world around which has constituted, since its origins, a founding element of the urban condition: this was the case in the Greek city as “cultural centre of the rural life of the City State” (*ibid.*); this was also the case in the Roman city which included the *Pagus*. In the city re-founded according to the principles of a new neo-technical era, it is therefore necessary to re-create such “reunion of town and country” (*ibid.*) (a reunion that the garden village model only dimly manages to imitate), within a city region articulated in a polycentric way.

For Geddes, decentralization is a crucial issue, because it makes it possible not to go beyond the dimensional threshold appropriate to the proper functioning of the territorial system. Large cities concentrate population, food, and power at the expense of their provincial areas, which are increasingly impoverished by this continuous drainage. One of the objectives of the regional survey will be to re-compose this complexity and complementarity between urban settlements and territory of reference. The bioregional scenario is also clearly polycentric, since it is a territorial system characterized by the presence of urban and rural centres organized in a reticular manner in dynamic balance with the territorial context (MAGNAGHI, 2014, 82). The polycentric settlement system and the network of non-artificialized spaces thus constitute the organizational pivots of the urban bioregion.

⁴ However, Choay positions Geddes within that humanist current (called "Anthropopolis") which represents an evolution of the culturalist current.

3. The personality of place as the basis of self-sustainable local development

Project-based valorisation of territorial assets is the basis of the bioregional scenario. Indeed, the rules of environmental wisdom are implicit in every place shaped by the co-evolutionary interaction between man and nature and can act as the “cognitive foundations” of the bioregion (MAGNAGHI, 2014, 91). These rules are particularly evident on the regional scale where hydrographic and geomorphological features play a crucial role through the conditioning of the territory structure. Without running into deterministic interpretations, we can frequently observe how, in Tuscany for instance, the most stable soils host the villages that have structured the settlement system throughout history (except for exceptions such as settlements founded in relation to strategic needs as the peri-fluvial or coastal ones); the soils more suited to agriculture experience the development of intense and stratified works of modelling of the slopes, while those more sloping and difficult to work are left to natural vegetation. Territorial structures produced through the co-evolution between anthropic choice and initial environment conditions vary first and foremost in relation to the variation of the latter, as well as in relation to the historical and political events of that particular environment.

The second fundamental element of the bioregional approach inherited from Geddes lies therefore in the recognition of this correlation between anthropic and natural component, which gives rise to specific identities, creating the deep structure of territory. As per Geddes’ quote: “settlements of men, from small to great, as initially determined by their immediate environment; and though thence extending into larger and larger towns and cities, yet retaining profoundly, even if obscurely, much of their initial regional character” (GEDDES, 1915, 280). In bioregional terms, such uniqueness can be understood as the territorial heritage of each built environment, a heritage composed of the structures sedimented by co-evolution and that gives birth to a true and proper “personality” of the place (MAGNAGHI, 2000). In this regard, when continuing the parallelism with Geddes’ thinking, we cannot fail to recall how for these “each place has a true personality; and with this shows some unique elements a personality too much asleep it may be, but which it is the task of the planner, as masterartist, to awaken” (GEDDES, 1915, 397)⁵.

⁵ Hence, the criticism of any attempt of standardized planning aimed at proposing valid settlement models independently from considering the context and its specificities (and that seems primarily addressed to the functionalist/progressist current of urbanism).

Which operational consequences can be drawn from this conceptualization? This is how the idea of planning is expressed: “on pain of economic waste, of practical failure no less than of artistic futility, and even worse, each true design, each valid scheme should and must embody the full utilisation of its local and regional conditions and be the expression of local and of regional personality” (GEDDES, 1915, 396-397). Only in this way it will become possible to escape from the perversely recursive mechanisms of the paleotechnics era and enter the neo-technical one in which “each leaves the land better than he found it; and so, in every way helps to make the nation's fortune, and this at its best, place and people together” (GEDDES, 1915, 384). Geddes expresses with great foreshadowing ability an approach that we could define as proto-ecological, in which the city is “like a living being, in constant relation to its environment, and with the advantages of this, its limitations too. Like the living being it is, a city reacts upon its environment, and in ever-widening circles” (GEDDES, 1915, 264). The personality of the place is therefore not an abstract concept but the matrix of a development that today we would call self-sustainable, i.e., able to regulate itself on a local basis.

The description and understanding of such personality, territorial heritage (in the bioregional sense) must therefore be the first task to be carried out in a planning process. To this end, Geddes mobilizes a series of investigative devices. One of the best known, because of its ability to capture the complex relationship between physical, anthropic, and social components (summarized in the triad place/work/folk), is the valley section. The valley section can be fully considered “an evolutionary diagram, a visual *longue durée*” (MACLEAN, 2004, 90). In fact, following the course of a river – a geographical entity that Geddes regards as “the essential unit for the student of cities and civilisations” (Geddes cit. in WELTER, 2002, 61)⁶ – it is possible to fully grasp the co-evolution between the three components represented by the physical environment, anthropic occupations, and settlements. It is no coincidence that, under the stain glass panel depicting the valley section of Edinburgh Outlook Tower, Geddes has the following engraving written: “*Microcosmos Naturae. Sedes Hominum. Theatrum Historiae. Eutopia Futuris*” (MACDONALD, 2004, 74), demonstrating that it is in the personality of the place (given precisely by the relationship between nature and culture mediated by history) that the real utopia of the future can be found.

Through the valley section, Geddes profoundly renews regionalism, until then “an archaic and backward-looking movement, following the patten of nationalism, and paying more attention to a static and isolationist conception of

⁶ In this aspect we can see the clear influence on Geddes by Elisée Reclus with his *Histoire d'un ruisseau* (1869).

the local community” (MUMFORD, 1947, 8). With the valley section, regional studies take on a dynamic meaning, aimed at investigating the constant interaction between man and the environment and the physical signs deposited by it (FERRETTI, 2010, 192; LEONARD, 2000, 80). Similarly, in the urban bioregion, administrative boundaries are overstepped by a reading that crosses physiography and anthropization in a co-evolutionary key. The identification of these boundaries is a fundamental part of the bioregional investigative work as it relates to the closing of water, waste, food, and energy cycles. In this area, too, the legacy of Geddesian research is particularly significant, as we will see in the next section.

4. An interconnected vision of “territorial sciences”

The concept of urban bioregion as a complex territorial system in which physiographic, settlement, economic, social aspects are intertwined, brings with it the need to recompose this wide range of knowledge inside the “territorial sciences”. The aim is to produce an integrated approach both in the analytical-interpretative phase and in the planning phase, as has been done in the maps and the atlases of heritage produced in many action-research experiences of the territorialist school. We come then to a third key point in which Patrick Geddes’ influence on the urban bioregionalist approach is clear: the projection of a synoptic vision able to “recognise and utilise all points of view” (GEDDES, 1915, 320) recomposing “scientific” and “artistic” (*ibid.*) aspects in the reading of the evolutionary trajectory of the city, including both its history and its “futures possibilities” (*ibid.*).

To explain this principle, not only on the academic level but making it an integral part of the educational experience of citizens, Geddes elaborates a device that is at the same time analytical, heuristic, and didactic: The Outlook Tower. This ancient building located in the historic centre of Edinburgh is re-worked by Geddes to make it the materialization of a pedagogical and interactive itinerary, accessible from its highest floor (PABA, 2013): the *camera obscura*, which was meant to offer the opportunity to grasp with the naked eye the unity of the city and of its territorial surroundings. The visit of the five floors below was downhill, proceeding from the local (Edinburgh) to the global (“the world”), encountering very heterogeneous materials: as Kenneth Maclean observed, “maps, photographs, paintings, diagrams and panoramas – all were grist to his mill of visual thinking that blended art and science and formed an integral part of his educational approach to regional survey” (MACLEAN, 2004, 89). The

Outlook Tower, like the valley section, can be considered as a genuine “visual teaching tool” (*ibid.*), part of the “gaze education” project (FERRARO, 2002) in which Geddes’ entire action-research is included.

This centrality of the “glance”, of visual understanding and communication through diagrams, schemes, maps, makes it possible to synthesize something that until then had been the prerogative of single disciplines, of compartmentalized knowledges. It opens a holistic and generalistic (MACDONALD, 2000, 58) perspective that Geddes himself explains, many times, in various writings, as in this passage of a letter to Lewis Mumford of 1930: “my squares are not to confine the world into my categories as some think; they are so many windowpanes for looking out into the world movement (or sometimes like spectrum analysis of complex radiations)” (GEDDES, MUMFORD, 1995, 301). There is another aspect to underline in the centrality of the Geddesian aesthetic dimension: the fact that this is not only a heuristic and didactic instrument, but it is also an opportunity to verify the good “functioning” of things. A certain aesthetic adequacy is also the expression of good evolution and development of places, as of every living organism, as the biologist Geddes well knows. In this perspective, the failure of a certain type of planning is also an “aesthetic failure” (GEDDES, 1947, 26): it is due to the “lack of harmony between the advancing phases of western science” (*ibid.*), which for this reason, does not produce integrated knowledge and action. The good plan, in order not to flatter itself on a merely technical operation (GEDDES, 1915, 34), must therefore start from the production of knowledge, from a survey that includes all the fields of analysis of the city, in the past and in the present (“situation, topography, and natural advantages”, “means of communication”, “industries, manufactures, and commerce”, “population”, “town conditions”, GEDDES, 1915, 356) in order to get to the possible city of the future. To all these specialized fields shall be added an indispensable dimension of investigation, that of “civics” and sociology, in order to obtain the city’s “veritable epic” (GEDDES, 1915, 359).

5. Real eutopias and the role of the inhabitants in their construction

The urban bioregion is a collective construction. Expert knowledge and contextual knowledge cooperate and intertwine to establish a new model of knowledge and planning. At the same time, it works for a re-appropriation of the dimension of self-government by local societies because the empowerment of the inhabitants-producers of the territory is considered one of the pre-conditions for the local project. The participation of the inhabitants in founding

the bioregion is therefore implemented on two intersection levels of competence regarding the management of places and their political legitimacy. It is no coincidence that, since the 90', many research experiences which developed within the territorialist school have involved the development of urban planning tools and a strong participatory character. This is the last point we want to highlight in our reading path of Geddesian urban bioregionalist approach: the development of the "consciousness of place" (MAGNAGHI, 2000) which is a basic condition for the local project.

For Geddes, the starting point is once again, the conception of the city as an evolutionary organism in which two components converge, the physical and the social, with specific characteristics that depend on the personality of the place. Therefore, "such regeneration is not merely nor ultimately geographic alone: it is human and social also" (GEDDES, 1915, 400). The understanding and appreciation of this link between the physical and the social body of the city is the source of some of Patrick Geddes' most effective design solutions, such as those for Indian cities. Take, for example, the Garden Village in Indore: here, instead of building a western-type sewage, Geddes had a central spine of gardens and vegetable gardens of shared management, fertilized according to the "everything to the soil" (FERRARO, 1998, 188), which is culturally and historically part of the Indian tradition. The inhabitants of the houses facing the central spine will, on the one hand, ensure the management of the gardens and, on the other hand, will be able to use their produce.

Something similar is done for the recovery of the sacred pools of Balrampur, potential malarial hotbeds to be drained, for conventional planning. Geddes, on the other hand, grasps their multi-functional value (regulation of the level of the hydrographic network, irrigation, air cooling). He proposes, therefore, that the inhabitants should carry out active maintenance of the pools, including the breeding of ducks and fish (which feed on malarial mosquitoes) which they can partially use, and the use of muds to fertilize the gardens. In one of the reports on the Indian towns, Geddes writes that "town planning is not mere place-planning, nor even work-planning. If it is to be successful it must be folk planning" (GEDDES, 1947, 22).

How to reach the construction of this "Eutopia" that "lies in the city around us; and it must be planned and realised, here or nowhere, by us as its citizens each a citizen of both the actual and the ideal city seen increasingly as one"? (GEDDES, 1915, vii). Starting with knowledge. It is through a profound understanding of the evolving organism that is the city that a sense of authentic citizenship can be founded. It is by means of the regional survey that true geographical citizenship can be constructed, where the term citizenship is

referred not only to the urban dimension but, once again, also to the regional one. To understand this concept, we must go back to the idea of the region as a polycentric organism, in which the urban and rural dimension play complementary and subsidiary roles. In this perspective, as David Matless has observed “the region should be understood as a scale of citizenship devised with a particular scheme of civilisation in mind, with the rural and urban upheld as distinct ways of life and poles of thought whose distinctive virtues might be allied” (MATLESS, 2000, 92). Knowledge and belonging thus develop of equals in a transcalar dimension.

6. Pursuing Geddes’ path further

At the end of this reading, in which we have highlighted four links between the urban bioregionalist approach and Geddesian thought, I would like to propose a concluding reflexion on two further aspects on Patrick Geddes’ work that should be enhanced. The first regards the relationship with history. Even though for Geddes, as we have seen, the lesson of History plays a predominant role in orienting the planning options for the city or region, his approach remains always strongly progressive, also supported by a profound faith in the possibilities of technology. He has a dynamic conception of history (deriving first and foremost from his training as a biologist and scholar of evolution) which does not produce idealized visions of the past. As Lewis Mumford observed, the interest and the “respect” of Geddes for the roots of regional culture, meant that he didn’t limited its expression to some historical moment: “if the roots were alive, they would keep on putting forth new shoots, and it was in the new shoots that he was interested” (MUMFORD, 1947, 8). I believe that even in the bioregionalist approach it is essential not to run into visions that crystallize heritage (and with it the communities that produce it) to a given point in history. We may keep in mind, above all, that the “self-sustainability” of certain historical territorial heritages should be read not only in environmental terms but also in economic and social terms, with a particular focus on issues such as spatial justice and gender perspective. Once again, we borrow Geddes’ beautiful words on the role of town planning, that “is to find the right places for each sort of people; places where they will really flourish” (GEDDES, 1947, 22).

The second point that I would like to emphasize may represent an axis of action-research to be increased in the bioregional approach: the intervention on an urban scale. Geddes, well before others, promoted an approach to urban regeneration that was opposed to the conventional Western one of his time. As

it is well-known, especially in India, he was able to intervene with the method of the conservative surgery, working with tactical actions, without upsetting the pre-existing tissues but supporting the re-generation project on the enhancement of their public places, their collective values (including symbolic ones), increasing, in this way, the participation and protagonism of citizens into the project. Geddes uses, in this regard, the metaphor of the city plan “as a great chessboard on which the manifold game of life is an active progress” (GEDDES, 1947, 27): this means that, in planning, as in chess, a strategy that faced with difficulties, makes a *tabula rasa* is less economical and less interesting than, even aesthetically, than one that turn existing difficulties into opportunities. I believe that the approach to re-building the city that is part of the model of the urban bioregion must incorporate a leap in scale as well as an analytical and design consideration of the existing built fabric of the entire city, especially of those marginalized in various ways (whether in the suburbs or in the historic centres). As Geddes wrote from India: “we must constantly keep in view the whole city, old and new alike in all its aspects and at all its levels” (GEDDES, 1947, 26) because the city – and the Indian city proves it par excellence – “form an inseparably interwoven structure” (*ivi*, 27).

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