

# POLITICS OF SMALL PAUL NOBLE PLACES + PATRICK GEDDES

EXHIBITION:

14 SEPTEMBER – 6 OCTOBER 2018

PREVIEW + IN CONVERSATION:

THURSDAY 13 SEPTEMBER, 5:30 – 7:30PM

Cooper Gallery

# POLITICS OF SMALL PLACES PAUL NOBLE + PATRICK GEDDES

14 September – 6 October 2018

## PREVIEW & IN-CONVERSATION

Thursday 13 September

5:30 – 7:30pm

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Half the world's population live and work in cities. Infused with the poetics of the mundane and the political, urban space is seemingly the single common experience that underscores how we relate 'en masse' to the world and each other. Offering paradoxical visions of the cornucopia of concrete, glass and steel that straddles the world, *Politics of Small Places* forges a unique dialogue between preeminent contemporary artist and Turner Prize nominee **Paul Noble** and pioneering Scottish urban planner **Patrick Geddes** (1854 – 1932). Bringing together Noble's unsettling encyclopaedic depictions of urban blight with Geddes' principle to 'think global act local' that calls for global consciousness and civic participation, the exhibition asks urgent questions on sustainability, social struggle, and collective effort.

Casting a stark light on the existential consequences of global urbanisation in the 21st century and drawing attention to the languages and metabolic processes that determine the modern city, Geddes and Noble offer contrasting imaginaries of urbanised space. For Geddes, with his famous valley section diagrams, which was based on the landscape and livelihoods of Dundee, city life is irrevocably tied to the landscape it sits within. In Noble's drawings this symbiotic relationship between nature and the urban is revoked. Blending craft with carnivalesque, Noble's urban depictions juxtapose social conscience with an acute humour to draw a world that is both austere and decadent.

The exhibition comprises Noble's *Nest* (2004) and *Eggface* (2014) accompanied by a suite of drawings from which *Nest* is derived. Modelled on an East Asian folding screen with intricate embroidery and marquetry, *Nest* portrays a deserted urban environment of egg carton buildings, which resonates dissonantly with Le Corbusier's 'machines for living', beside a dead tree. *Eggface*, a sculpture and film projection, reveals a woman giving birth to a large black plastic egg. Forming a recurring motif in Noble's work, the egg indexes the artist's philosophical take on the paradoxical cycles of birth, death and waste that stand as the genesis and foundation of all life and indeed of our society itself.

Alongside Noble's works will be eight original diagrams selected from the Geddes Archive Collections at the University of Strathclyde. Part of Geddes' 'thinking machines', an immense body of diagrams and notes drawn in red and blue crayons during his lectures, these works explicate how different environments figure in the formation of social groups and their collective consciousness. Today Geddes' work provides the means to look again at the urban spaces in which we subsist, consume and struggle.

During the summer of 2018, **Paul Noble** engaged in a four-week written correspondence with **Lorens Holm**, Director of Geddes Institute for Urban Research at the University of Dundee as part of Cooper Summer Residency. This culminates in an in-conversation event at the exhibition preview on 13 September. Featuring Noble, Holm and **Dr. Louise Reid**, researcher in Sustainable Development and Geography at the University of St Andrews, the event explores current debates on urbanisation alongside ideas of social and environmental justice.

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Paul Noble, *Nest*, 2014, Embroidered screen with marquetry, exhibition installation view, *Welcome to Nobson*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam, courtesy the artist.



## BIOGRAPHY



**Paul Noble** is a contemporary artist forging a unique and maverick path in the ebullient British art scene. He received widespread international recognition for his vast and monumental drawing project, *Nobson Newtown*, which he began in 1996. Drawing image after image, story after story—at once architect and town planner, archaeologist and cartographer, social historian and activist, creator and destroyer—Noble has invented and described a melancholy urban vision somewhere between Le Doux's revolutionary utopias, Sim City, and the post-holocaust wastelands pictured in the daily media. A meticulous and dedicated draftsman, Noble creates dizzyingly elaborate encrypted schemes, drawing from inspirations as diverse as ancient Chinese scrolls and Japanese sculptures, Fabergé eggs and brick walls, eighteenth-century pornography and animal rights, Hieronymous Bosch and Oyvind Fahlstrom. The sheer level of detail in his drawings defies the capacity of the eye to see and the mind to fully grasp them.

Recent solo museum exhibitions include *Paul Noble: New Works*, Gagosian San Francisco, USA (2017); *Paul Noble: Nobson*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam, Netherlands (2014); *Paul Noble: The Gates*, Gagosian Gallery Athens, Greece (2013); *Paul Noble Marble Hall*, Laing Art Gallery Newcastle, UK (2011) and *TENT*, Cooper Gallery Dundee, UK (2011). Noble currently lives and works in London. He was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2012.

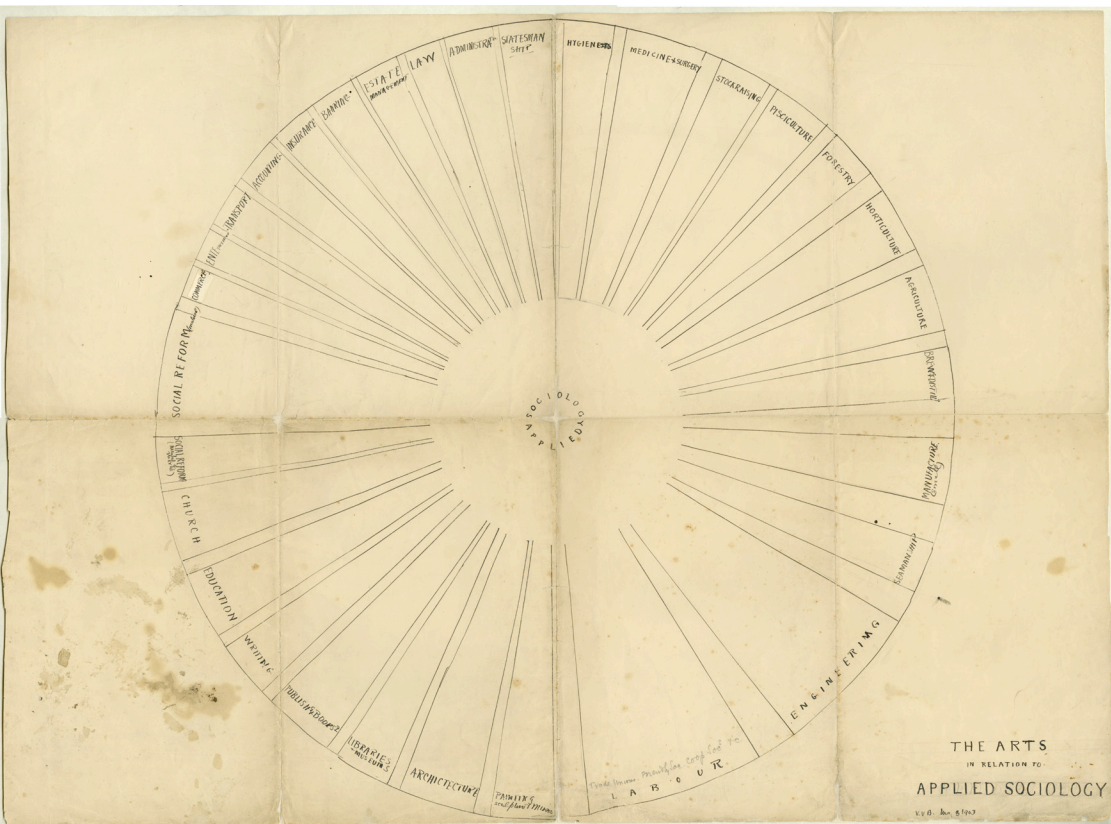


## BIOGRAPHY



**Patrick Geddes** was a biologist, sociologist and town planner with a strong interest in education, the arts, history and many other subjects. He believed strongly in the inter-relationships between all branches of knowledge. Geddes grew up and was educated in Scotland, and studied biology in London. After a professional career as a biologist in London and France, he settled in the late 1880s in Edinburgh, where he became involved in the regeneration of the Old Town. In 1889, Geddes became Professor of Botany at Dundee University College. In the ensuing decades, Geddes developed a highly individualistic theory of human societies and their spatial manifestation in the city and in the country, drawing upon theories in biology, geography, philosophy and politics. In 1904, Geddes published his first major report, *City Development: a study of parks, gardens and culture institutes*, which enhanced his reputation among architects and planners. From 1914-1924, Geddes lived mainly in India, where he was involved in town planning. He accepted the Chair of Sociology and Civics at the University of Bombay in 1919. At this period, Geddes designed the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, garden suburbs for Jerusalem and Haifa, settlements elsewhere in Palestine, and the master plan for Tel Aviv. After his return to Europe in 1924, Geddes settled in Montpellier, France, where he founded the Scots College as an International University to propagate his ideas. He was knighted in 1932 and died at Montpellier.





Commissioned by Patrick Geddes, *The Arts in Relation to Applied Sociology*, by Victor Verasis Branford, Drawing on paper, date unknown, courtesy the University of Strathclyde Archives and Special Collections.

## LIST OF WORKS

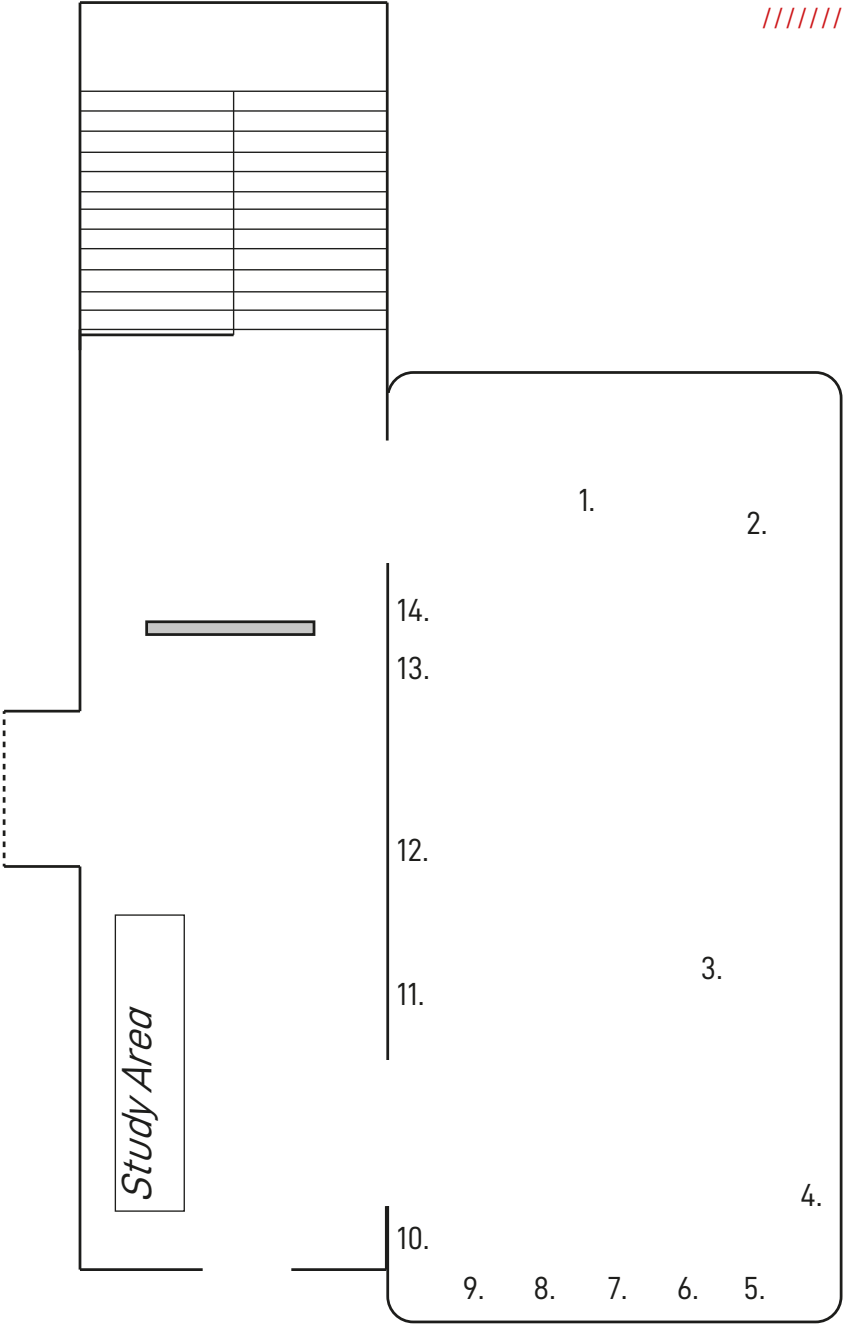
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1. Paul Noble, *Eggface*, 2014;  
Steel, aluminium, projection screen
2. Paul Noble, *Black Egg*, 2004;  
Silicon
3. Paul Noble, *Nest*, 2004;  
Embroidered screen with marquetry
4. Patrick Geddes, *Valley Section*,  
Pencil on paper
5. Patrick Geddes, *Evils Organic & Social*,  
Pencil and colour crayon on paper in 8 taped sections
6. Patrick Geddes + Victor Verasis Branford, *The Arts in relation  
to Applied Sociology*,  
Ink and pencil on paper, comprised of 4 taped sections
7. Patrick Geddes, *The Earth as a Floating Egg*,  
Pen and pencil on paper
8. Patrick Geddes, *Social Life*,  
Coloured ink on paper, 2 sheets
9. Patrick Geddes, *Incipient*,  
Red, blue, and black ink on folded paper
10. Patrick Geddes, *Philosophy Education Religion + The  
Content of Civics*,  
Black ink on paper, 2 sheets
11. Patrick Geddes, *Nature!...Life?...*,  
Blue coloured pencil on paper, 2 sheets
12. Paul Noble, *Tree with Eggs*, 2003;  
Pencil on Paper
13. Paul Noble, *Egg Carton Technique*, 2004;  
Pencil on Paper
14. Paul Noble, *Egg Carton Technique Actual*, 2004;  
Pencil on Paper



FLOOR PLAN

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# NOTES ON WORKS BY PATRICK GEDDES

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## ***Valley Section***

This valley section appears to be based on Dundee, running down from the Cairngorm glens, to the Strathmore Valley, ending in the river Tay. Note the symbols for the livelihoods

that occupy it. M = miner; W = woodsman; H = hunter;.... The valley section describes the interdependency of the city and its region. The city supplies trade and goods to the region, the region is essentially the watershed, supplying raw materials, food, and water to the city. 'The Valley Section is almost everywhere, in Western Europe the characteristic geographic unit. This serves as an introduction to the Rational Geography of Cities. These are best studied with the Valley Section and its resultant occupations and corresponding types of settlements. Note the Miner, the Woodman, and the Hunter on the heights; the Shepherd on the grassy slopes; the Peasant on the lower slopes; the Fisher at sea level. Thus have cities arisen and still arise. As the merchant nobles of Venice sprang from the fishing boat, or the millionaires of Pittsburgh arise beside the forge, so surely do their cities retain the essential character conditioned by their environment and occupation.' *Cities in Evolution* (1949) page 166.



## ***Evils Organic & Social***

Lecture notes mapping society and civic life, showing the evils of the paleotechnic city, here represented by the intersection of Medusopolis with Gorgonopolis. These evils include poverty, indolence, vice, and folly. The intersection includes Geddes' diagram of the joint progression of the built environment and civic consciousness from T[own] > S[chool] > U[niversity] > C[ity]. The eight sections form a blue and a red column of 4 tiers each.

Blue indicates analysis. Red constitutes a civic call to action.

The four tiers, from top down are:

IV. Evils organic and social > A call to Arouse Revive Transmute (accompanied by an Edinburgh city section) (Educate) (Civicise)

III. Vital + Civic > A call to Develop + Civilise

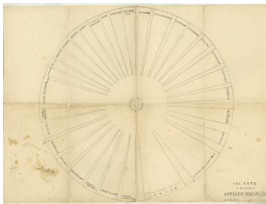
II. History - phases and annals > A call to Direct Politise Continue

I. Geography – Survey > A call to Develop Colonise Country Plan Town (here accompanied by a Dundee valley section)

About the evil of cities Geddes wrote: 'Trade competition, nature competition, and war competition have not failed to reward their worshippers. This is the natural

accumulation, the psychological expression of very real evils and dangers.' *Cities in Evolution* (1949) page 41.

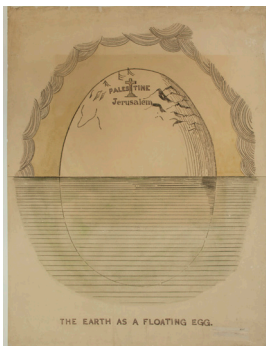
The figure of Medusa is ambiguous. In Greek mythology, Medusa was so hideous that she turns to stone, anyone who captures her gaze. She has entered culture as a signifier of male castration, female rage, and a reality we cannot face. She also signifies a terrifying beauty, and, when affixed as a talisman to a shield, is supposed to ward off evil. Geddes regarded the city as a hieroglyph in which the knowledge of a civilisation is inscribed in stone, available to those who know how to read it, suggesting that the gaze of Medusa may be the general condition of cities.



### ***The Arts in relation to Applied Sociology***

The arts are like spokes on a wheel with Applied Sociology at the hub. What is interesting is the list of arts, which includes, in addition to art and architecture: social reform, transport, accounting, insurance, banking, stock raising, and labour. Geddes described his own work in planning cities and societies as *applied sociology*, in other words,

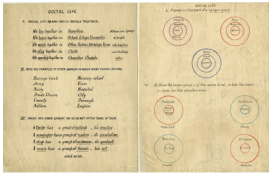
social thinking applied by activists who used, e.g., art, architecture, social reform, transport, accounting, insurance, banking, stock raising, and labour, to build social groups. This diagram is related to his idea of the synoptic view and its instance in the Edinburgh Outlook Tower, in which the problem of cities is addressed by a convocation of experts in different fields. In the Outlook Tower these experts stand at the centre and look outward at Edinburgh.



### ***The Earth as a Floating Egg***

In which an earth/egg is shown half submerged in a cosmic ocean, and Palestine and Jerusalem appear on the dry side. The egg appears as a symbol in the creation myths of the early great civilisations where it was associated with Spring festivals of revival and rebirth, and hence later with Easter. The egg is often the Christian symbol of the Resurrection in still life painting. It appears as the World Egg in the mythologies of Egypt. It may appear in the drawing of the solar system (Life? Nature!), perhaps symbolising the cosmos. Geddes was

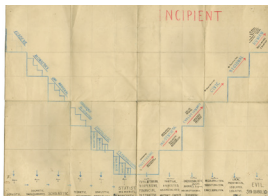
interested, personally and professionally, in Palestine and the Holy Land. The Geddes archive includes numerous plans and photographs of Jerusalem, Palestine, the Temple on the Mount, and contemporary buildings in Palestine. He is the author of the plan of the city of Tel Aviv.



## Social Life

A list of 3 different types of social group. Accompanied by a sheet of 7 circular diagrams showing two different conditions in which a smaller group nestles within a larger one. Geddes is concerned with understanding how social groups are constituted by relationships and

boundaries, and how these social forms go together with the built form of the city. His disclaimer – 'All these are Groups of people in the first place and Buildings after.' – only serves to underscore this point. In his thinking on cities, they often go together, although relationship is ambiguous and over-determined, and hence articulating it is a task without end. 50 years later the social philosopher Michel Foucault will coin the term, the *social apparatus*, the complex of lines and networks at many scales, that describe a social group.



## Incipient

The title suggests that a series of characteristics might be emerging in cities and social life. This is an example of one of Geddes' *thinking machine* diagrams in which a large sheet of paper is folded into a grid so as to create a 'spreadsheet' that correlates different social

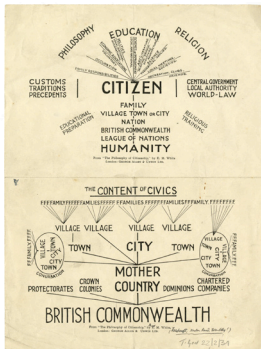
characteristics. Typically, they correlate cultural epochs (classical, medieval, renaissance, enlightenment,...) and paradigmatic thinkers (Benedict, Aquinas, Erasmus,...) or intellectual characteristics (torpid, scholastic, pedantic,...). This one appears to be extraordinarily eclectic, matching Polytechnic with Examinational, Pro-Synthetic with Specialistic,...

Geddes seems to have had some fun with the base line.

Under Polytechnic: Futilitarian, Dispersive, Financial, Destructive.

Under Evolutionary: Individualistic, Amoral, Ob-Evolutionary.

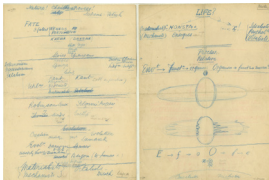
Under Civic: Megalopolitan, Parasitopolitan, Canceropolitan.



### ***Philosophy Education Religion + The Content of Civics***

Two diagrams depicting Civics, in which the citizen is positioned with respect to, first, thought and culture nested within social groupings of ascending size, and secondly, 'branch and trunk' political groupings of ascending size. The same interest in defining the relations of large and small social groups to each other (nested like Russian dolls, branching like trees, etc.) is in a number of the diagrams on exhibition. The diagrams are taken from pages 82 and 65 of E. M. White, *The Philosophy of Citizenship: an introduction to citizenship for adults*

(London: George Allen & Unwin, 1921). A review from the *Spectator* 27 August 1921 'Mr. White, the London County Council lecturer, has written a most admirable introduction to the study of modern civics. Those who would acquire a general knowledge of the subject, but have no appetite for an extended course of reading should be extremely grateful for this comprehensive little book. It is simply and lucidly written and illustrated by original diagrams.'



### ***Nature!... Life?...***

These two sheets fulfil the expectations for obscurity and eclecticism for which Geddes is sometimes known. Diagrammatic notes regarding nature, philosophy, religion, life, and literature. The right-hand sheet – **Life?** – seems to articulate an idea about the recursive

relationship of Environment > Function > Organism : Organism > Function > Environment. It is repeated below diagrams of Saturn (the solar system? the cosmos?) in the form of an equation  $X = Efo/Ofe$ . The left-hand sheet – **Nature! Chance! Process!** – gathers together the three Fates (named as Nemesis, Fortune, and Karma), Darwin, the philosophers Kant, Hobbes, Spinoza, the allegorical novels *Robinson Crusoe* and *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the categories Materialists, Mechanists, Vitalists. (The verso side returns to the theme of Fate, but dwells in the pre-Olympian gods and the philosopher-theologians Saint Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Pelagius, and John Scotus Eriugena, Duns Scotus).

Notes written and compiled by Lorens Holm

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*I make drawings that sometimes look like buildings but really the buildings are words pictorialised or illuminated in pencil. The words are written in a font I designed called nobson. The letter shapes of nobson look like buildings. I write a word in nobson and it becomes a place. I write TENT and it is a tent.*

Paul Noble, *TENT*, 2011

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*Town plans are thus no mere diagrams, they are a system of hieroglyphics in which man has written the history of civilisation, and the more tangled their apparent confusion, the more we may be rewarded in deciphering it.*

Patrick Geddes, *Cities in Evolution*, 1915

## REFLECTION

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Patrick Geddes + Paul Noble

Patrick + Paul

planner + artist

sociological intelligence + a numinous vision

patricians and patrimony + the Gospel According to Paul

**two [different] forms of authority [and maybe I remain hidden between them]**

*'Town plans are thus no mere diagrams, they are a system of hieroglyphics in which man has written the history of civilisation, and the more tangled their apparent confusion, the more we may be rewarded in deciphering it.'*

Geddes, *Cities in Evolution* (1915)

The polymathic botanist-planner Sir Patrick Geddes coined the term 'conurbation' for the way towns grow together to form cities and the phrase 'think global act local'. He was one of the first people to recognize the importance of a global consciousness, as opposed to, say, a colonial one. Our actions are always place-based, we build this city or that one, not cities generally or globally, but every local action should be the result of global reflection and it will have global consequences. Geddes was an activist more than a theorist, although his activism is probably more easily assimilated into sociological and planning discourse than his theory.

Geddes (1854-1932) was born in Ballater, went to school in Perth, university at Imperial College, London, and was Chair of Botany at the University of Dundee (1888-1919), where he is regarded – along with his contemporary D'Arcy Thompson – as a native son. At Imperial, he was a student of Darwin's close colleague Thomas Henry Huxley. His most well known book, *Cities in Evolution*, alludes to his principal insight that societies and cities evolve together by a process of mutual adaptation. *Evolution* not development. Lewis Mumford, the American historian of cities and technology, was one of his students.

Geddes is perhaps most interesting for his highly condensed diagrams – essentially his lecture notes and *thinking machines* – which sought to explicate the relation of societies to the environments they build in order to live well in them, rather the way an evolutionary biologist is interested in the relation of a species to its environmental

niche. *Condensed* in Freud's sense (another contemporary): condensation is a part of dream work, producing images that are ambiguous and open to interpretation without end, over determined, even. Most of them began as flip chart sheets; they were drawn in red and blue fat crayons during his lectures. His most famous diagram is the **valley section**, which was based on Dundee, a section of the landscape that runs from river port to mountaintop, Tay to Cairngorms, correlating at each stage, a livelihood: fisherman, farmer, shepherd, woodsman, hunter, miner,.... In one published version of the valley section, the livelihoods are shown as personifications within niches. This diagram puts the city within its principal natural environment, the watershed, and in its principal mercantile context, between a resource rich hinterland and a trade route to the world (an example of *think global*). Most importantly, it puts a society in its natural environment, relating landform to fundamental livelihoods and hence landform to a society whose multiple and complex functions are essentially a superstructure built upon these livelihoods.

What is far more difficult is a corresponding diagram, a **city section**, based on Edinburgh, a section through the Royal Mile, never adequately developed, never definitively published, called Medusopolis or Gorgonopolis, which matches key social formations from different historical periods with key city institutions of that period. In the Medieval period, the burgher's town house is positioned between Edinburgh castle and abbey (Holyrood?). In the industrial period, the slum is positioned between the factory (castle ghosted in) and the tomb of Adam Smith. The city, such as he saw it, gets pretty bad press. His keywords: 'Evils Organic & Social', 'Arouse-Revive-Transmute', and 'Conquer! Expel! Repress! (Avenge!)'.

Geddes the sociologist proposed that every city should have a **cities exhibition**. It would be one of the city's key permanent civic institutions, along side other civic institutions like the city hall, museum, court house and jail, etc. It would be organized historically, the last room of which would be the planning office, where plans of the city were updated in real time. At the Outlook Tower in Edinburgh, the only cities exhibition ever implemented, the content was organized territorially, as a series of every expanding concentric circles. The Outlook Tower included an outlook across Edinburgh at its parapet, plus a *camera obscura* that put a living image of Edinburgh within the representational space of the exhibition. First you learn about the place you live, then expanding outward along trade routes, about your nation state, the continent, the world. The cities exhibition would be continually updated by new information; its content would be supplied by a program of citizen surveys. Citizens would learn about the place they live, reading the hieroglyphs, because they did the survey. Thereafter the exhibition is there to inform others. Geddes argued that the cities exhibition was a precondition for parliamentary democracy because how could you responsibly vote if you did not know about the place you lived and its place in the world.

Geddes was an ardent proponent of citizen participation in cities. His project is about raising what we might call civic consciousness, analogue to Marx's class consciousness. For Geddes, civics is about knowledge and participation, and both are place-based. The city is a technological artefact and it either keeps us divided and isolated, or it becomes a platform for collective self-determination. Cities were thus either palaeotechnic and neotechnic. These are Geddes' neologisms. (*Is digital technology palaeotechnic or neotechnic?*) For Geddes, civics is about building the knowledge environment, the environment that gives you the knowledge necessary to participate in your own governance. The city is the environment that allows you to communicate with your peers. It is modelled, rather idealistically, on a form of university that no longer exists. Raising civic consciousness was about public participation in the planning process of a city through city surveys; and planning was about building knowledge and governance. If we want wellbeing we need cities that make the formation of social groups possible, as opposed to cities that fracture and isolate them. We need cities that are machines for collective thinking. United we stand, divided we fall.

What is extraordinary about Geddes is the diffusion of his thought, going to so many places, spanning so many disciplines. And also its dogged persistence, sustained in a single lifeline of publications, lectures, exhibitions, planning projects, suspended between optimism and failure. Geddes was an activist, and an advocate. He saw something that he could not communicate because it was a message that others refused to receive. He saw something that we seem to be congenitally constituted to refuse, at the level of the individual and at the level of the collective, where it takes a political form. This refusal silenced him: you cannot shout into the void forever. You cannot sustain a message, without an audience to hook it. We carry with us the fantasy that we are autonomous from our environment, as if we survey it from a vantage point. We think that there is a high palisade between us and environment within which we dwell, as if without this autonomy we could not survive.

Lorens Holm 04 July 2018

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**Cooper Summer Residency is an annual programme for artists, writers and thinkers to reflect upon and experiment with ideas and strategies that will extend their practice. The 2018 edition featured Lorens Holm, Director of Geddes Institute for Urban Research at the University of Dundee, in correspondence with artist Paul Noble. The correspondence between Holm and Noble as well as further reflections on Geddes is available across Cooper Gallery's website, social media channels and Group Critical Writing site.**



# READING LIST + PLAYLIST BY PAUL NOBLE

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## READING LIST

Nawaal El-Sadaawi, *'God Dies by the Nile'*, 1985  
Heinrich von Kleist, *'The Earthquake in Chile'*, 1807  
Svetlana Alexievich, *'Second Hand Time'*, 2013  
Jean Joseph Goux, *'Oedipus, Philosopher'*, 1993  
Michel Serres, *'Statues'*, 1987  
Samuel Beckett, *'Malone Dies'*, 1951  
Samuel Beckett, *'Mercier & Camier'*, 1970  
Samuel Beckett, *'Watt'*, 1953  
Thomas Berhart, *'Gargoyles'*, 1967  
Franz Kafka, *'The Burrow'*, 1931  
Gerrit Achterberg, *'Ballad of the Gasfitter'*, 1977

## PLAYLIST

Peter Maxwell Davies, *'Eight Songs for a Mad King'*, 1969  
Galina Ustvolskaya, *'Composition No.2'*, 1972/73  
Davide Mosconi, *'La Musica dell'anno zero'*, 2001  
Toshi Ichianagi, *'Man's Pure Heart'* from Opera from the Works of Tadanori Yokoo, 1969  
Meredith Monk, *'Key'*, 1971  
Luc Ferrari, *'Ouvert-Ferme'* from L'Œuvre Électronique, 2009  
Nick Carter, *'Abstracts of Violence'*, 1979

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Cooper Gallery would like to thank:

Paul Noble for his creative energy, enthusiasm and generous support towards this exhibition.

Lorens Holm for his invaluable contribution to the exhibition and Cooper Summer residency and his generous support to Cooper Gallery.

Louise Reid for her insightful contribution to the exhibition in-conversation event.

Archives and Special Collections at University of Strathclyde for loaning the works of Patrick Geddes to the exhibition and their support throughout the research and production of the project.




Gagosian Gallery for loaning the works of Paul Noble to the exhibition and their support throughout the research and production of the project.

Our colleagues at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design and University of Dundee for their support.

James Keiller Investments for their contribution of funding towards this exhibition.

Opening Hours  
Mon - Fri: 10am - 5pm  
Saturday: 11am - 5pm

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Cover Image:  
Paul Noble, *Egg Carton Technique Actual*, 2004  
Pencil on paper. Courtesy the artist

## Cooper Gallery



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