

**a Geddesian Essay on the Evolution of Edinburgh, and Ten Proposals for the City’s advancement**

Edinburgh – and especially its centre – is a compact, civilised 3-dimensional dynamo of a city, a peerless urban forum whose history of social and intellectual interaction is manifest in an urban environment that is, in itself, an extraordinary drama. I love it, from the heights of its crags and monuments, down through its parks and public spaces and into its dark closes and warm bars.

Its heart exemplifies what we might call the “City of Wellbeing”: walkable, liveable, a mix of bustle, calm and chance meetings, a place where we can live happy, creative and economically-effective lives with far less of the social dislocation, car miles and concreting-over of the countryside that suburbs and newtowns offer us. Indeed, it’s bizarre to hear the developer-friendly arguments promoted for “eco-towns” that are really commuter suburbs built on prime farmland. We develop most sustainably when we renew our existing communities, following Patrick Geddes’ concept of “Conservative Surgery” by repairing good old buildings and clearing bad ones, and building anew around the social and environmental issues which concern us today.

If Edinburgh is an exemplar of the integrative, sustainable city (we’ve even got a mountain in the middle!), it is also an environment where discussion of “heritage” and development should be inseparable. This is a working place built for commerce as much as for pomp, and the “wealth” of our city is bound-up with how carefully and vigorously we have built in the past – bound-up with the city’s historic confidence and modernity. It’s a brilliant place to live in, but also to visit as a tourist and to run a business from, and businesses want to locate here precisely because of Edinburgh’s history, beauty and liveability.

Given, then, that the renewal of Edinburgh is the essence of “sustainable development”, and that Scotland’s economy is hugely dependant on the robust health of the city, the current impasse disgraces us. Huge sites and buildings, that developers would love to invest in, lie vacant, sometimes because of the reckless policies of our Banks and sometimes because of the madness of Government taxation that burdens repair and reuse with VAT, against zero for demolition and newbuild.

But often it is the pyrrhic slug-out between elements of the Heritage and Development lobbies, that brings with it dereliction. The worst of the Heritage zealots welcome new proposals with phrases like “... let’s look forward to a long and bloody battle”, while some of the Development Lobby seem to think that the built-wealth of Edinburgh has been saved from post-war despoliation, simply to be offered-up to them for their efficient consumption today.

“Long and bloody” battles soak-up the energy that should be going into designing the project, diverting fees away from architects and beautifully-crafted buildings, and into the pockets of public relations companies and lawyers. At the same time the toxic atmosphere encourages people wanting to invest in Edinburgh to follow the path of least resistance, to produce schemes of timidity and aridity in an attempt to avoid getting anyone cross, or to be as arrogant as they dare, in order to steamroller proposals through the system. Neither benefits the city.

The further away from the centre, the more thoughtless big business gets. The proposals for most of the vast Edinburgh Waterfront roll-out a relentless series of dense streets and tall, donut blocks with hugely overshadowed and claustrophobic back courts at their hearts. Where is the amenity – the sunshine and gathering spaces – in such layouts, and how will proper communities grow in them? And why this particular block form? There is an unholy alliance of “traditional urbanists” and developers who would like to cleanse us of local urban traditions such as the intricate, subtle closes and mercats of the Old Town, and build nothing but blocks, closely-lined streets and squares. The future is, apparently, the triumph of blinged and inflated Victorian tenements, built as “aspirational housing for young people” by and for young bankers. The soaring, glitzy donuts of Platinum Point are its apogee.

How can the City raise the debate, and the aspirations and quality of development in Edinburgh, while moving our economy forward? And how can concerned citizens like me help?

I have been appointed, by the Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, as their “Geddes Honorary Professorial Fellow”. Trained as a biologist, and a friend of Charles Darwin, Edinburgh’s Patrick Geddes is regarded as the father of “town planning”. His great work was “Cities in Evolution” and the Darwinian title summarises an understanding that the City is an ecosystem – not frozen in time, waiting to be completed to some grand, utopian masterplan, but changing and adapting. He’s a hero, and I am proud to receive this honour.

More than this, I am keen to use the position to help the City debate the issues around how it should evolve, today. I discussed my concerns, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November, with an enthusiastic and engaged audience of 200, in the new University Informatics building on Bristo Square (itself an excellent example of confidence and modernity), and put forward Ten Proposals for the City to consider:

1. The Haymarket Hotel: given that the overwhelming majority of Edinburgh people would welcome an ambitious, contemporary building by a significant local architect like Richard Murphy – but that is not so toweringly-dominant – we need to talk about how to achieve this. I understand that part of the site, for offices, is not developable, given the economic downturn. The solution, then, looks achievable: cancel the offices and push the hotel down and into that part of the site, with a thorough redesign achieving a lower building and a better square.
2. Caltongate and Community Advocacy: when Mountgrange – my clients and the developer of the Caltongate site – went belly-up, I approached the “Save Our Old Town” community group, that have so lambasted the proposals, to suggest that, with legal and organisational advice from national agency “Local People Leading” and finance from the Nordic Enterprise Trust (a Norwegian Oil Trust, looking to invest in social projects), they could stop forward to lead. They told me that they would prefer to stick in their bunker, to lambast the next developer. Edinburgh needs communities who will take more responsibility than simply insulting those that wish to invest, and I asked that they reconsider their refusal.
3. Leith Wynd: part of our proposal for Caltongate was to recover and rebuild the historic Leith Wynd, that Victorian demolition had wiped-out. We have extended this proposal to recover and reopen the bridge link from Jeffrey Street through Waverley Station to Calton Road. It hugely increases connectivity

in the City, while providing new, commercial opportunities for the Strategic Rail Authority (the owner of Waverley Station). I hope that the Council will persuade (demand!) that the SRA take this forward.

4. Argyle House: “1960s” architecture is as unpopular, today, as Victorian architecture was 40 years ago. I fear that, in 40 years time, we will bemoan the loss of so many good 60s buildings, just as we do Victorian buildings today. Argyle House, between West Port and Kings Stables Road, is a good, simple 60s building, but is slated for demolition. Aside from stylistic arguments, such replacement is inherently un-sustainable – it’s very solid, and has hundreds of years left in it if properly looked-after. I would like the University’s students to look at re-use schemes, for the City.

5. Infrastructure: Trams. A tram system is the best way to extend the compact walkability of the Edinburgh centre out to its margins. We should welcome the City, and its tram company, being upfront about the additional costs and timescale inherited from predecessors that have made mistakes. They should also look urgently, and honestly, at improvements – such as ensuring that Princes Street is served by two tram stops and not one, solitary one – that pressure-groups have demanded.

6. Infrastructure: the Third Forth Bridge. Investment in much-needed infrastructure is great! Another Bridge, with its tsunami of traffic, is not. Drop it please, and redirect the money towards an Edinburgh-to-Glasgow Bullet Train (the “Central Belter”), and to completing the Edinburgh Tram loop and re-opening the Southern Suburban line.

7. Commissioning Buildings: the Council. Everybody these days has to swim in a commissioning culture driven by dissociation and avoidance of responsibility: risk-transfers, joint-ventures, public-private-partnerships etc. So while the Council has recognised the regenerative value in, gingerly, reviving the construction of social housing, it has gone through a complicated process to appoint a masterplanning architect, then appointed another to draw the proposal in more detail, and is likely to advertise for a private sector partner and architect to build the thing. Such “good practice” is as advised – by the very lawyers and process-controllers who stand to make more money out of such byzantine, debilitating complexity than the architects trying to find a way through it, to build it. It would be lovely for the Council to just borrow the money, write a brief demanding community and amenity, appoint a good architect, and get on with building some good and simple homes.

8. Commissioning Buildings: Edinburgh Institutions. In the past city Institutions would commission their own buildings, as proud urban expressions of their commercial confidence. Nowadays they take them “off-the-peg”, from developers vying to deliver standardised, technocratic packages, full of stuff like sealed windows and air-conditioning that nobody really wants – all for the same sort of dissociation reasons as above. Edinburgh’s private-sector leaders need to demonstrate concern for the health and confidence of the city itself, by showing leadership in the built environment.

9. the Planning Process and the Urban Panel: Planning – it seems to me by definition – should be about setting-out in advance principles of use, mix, amenity, view and connectivity, to ensure a development adds to the health and wellbeing of the City. Instead it has degenerated into a “what does it look like” bunfight, that does nothing for us. The City has created a new “Urban Design Panel”. It was to have been called the “Urban Forum”, which seems, to me, to be a better title, for it should be about bringing people together to debate those true “Planning” issues. And with “inclusion” in mind, and awareness

that there are many organisations who care for the health and wealth of Edinburgh, it should add to its membership the AHSS, World Heritage Trust and Chamber of Commerce.

10. Competitions: the Leader of the Council, Jenny Dawe, has suggested Competitions as a way of raising the debate and agreeing on development. Of course there are many types of competition, and the City should look at European models (the long-established Helsinki model, for instance) that involve a public discussion of the brief, and deliver outstanding development. As a local architect I could imagine briefs that allowed intimate local knowledge, and experience of building here, to come to the fore. The Urban Forum might supply jury members – and why not invite Terry Farrell back, to chair one? In such a way the opportunity a site represents could enthuse a wide community, who would feel part of a site's future, rather than inclined to react against it.

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