



Revisiting Conservative Surgery: Urban Conservation and Living City

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ABSTRACT City becomes conservation-worthy by being a cultural setting. Heritage city, once conserved, shall facilitate the continuous evolution of the city culture. Traditionally, urban conservation was considered as preserving the physical fabric of a few monumental structures of a city, representing either a building type or an architect. This, compartmentalising the urban space, turning it in to an open-air museum, and replacing some sub-societies with more influential ones, did not facilitate the continuity of the unified image of the city. The result has been the degradation of city life. Our research proposition for urban conservation is to strengthen the container-quality of urban space by protecting the unique image which facilitates dwelling in the city. We interpret urban conservation as strengthening the container quality of urban space by achieving the equilibrium between continuity of heritage values and change of living needs. Similar ideas in the works of Sir Patrick Geddes and his disciples can be found. His concept, conservative surgery, guides us to see such equilibrium between change and continuity. This paper, based on a literature review, attempts to revisit this concept.

Keywords: Heritage-value, Cultural-continuity, Place-making, & Patrick Geddes

Introduction: Urban Conservation

City is a concentration of cultural production of civilizations. It is one of the most creative artefacts by man and his society in their struggle to lead a good life, with or without signified monuments or a memorable past. Evolving like a living entity, it accumulates layers of living experiences of individuals who share the city spaces as members of a group.¹ Being foci of cultural diversification, it deserves to be proclaimed a cultural heritage.² Protection of this cultural-setting-turned artefact shall not be restricted to age, artistic, or such *intrinsic* values of its built fabric. It is necessary to place the city within the particular process of becoming a heritage and those who

played a signified role in proclaiming it a heritage. City's tangible elements such as the built fabric, streets, memorials, will lose their significance if isolated from the authentically-evolved life and from the minor architecture that has evolved around them.³ The society reads the city as one unit and therefore continuity of this collective image essentially facilitates further cultural evolution. Among the most illustrious examples for the necessity of the continuity of this image is the reconstruction of historic cities in the post-war eras as a backdrop to creating nation-states.⁴

The awareness of the cultural values of the city has a long history. The responses of the ancient city builder to nature or to the society are among such

values documented in the city. The Greeks, Romans and the city builders of the orient respected the particular order of the context in which new urban buildings were added although the values respected would have varied from age, utility, historic, artistic to architectural (Erder 1986). The layered urban forms importantly emphasize that the evolution of the social and urban order was given due attention. With the rise of professionalism in architecture in the 17th century and the dawning of modernism with the industrial revolution, (Kanerva 1999) denying the requisite for continuity between past, present and future, individualistic *monumental* buildings started dominating the urban landscape. The concern for monumental Europe after the two world wars paid no attention to the city as a whole or to the society but to the *picked and chosen* monumental buildings-looked upon as meritorious (Koponen 2000). The Venice Charter of 1964 is a preservation approach evolved from this attitude thus focuses onto individual stone buildings (Munasinghe 1998). The Washington Charter of 1986 deals with urban areas but fails to define the link between city and urban life though discusses the need to protect urban quarters, city centres, etc. The conservation attempts framed by the two charters, paying undue attention on tangible elements, have protected the city physically yet turning its urban space into *exhibits or tourist products*. The result has been the depletion of *container quality* of urban space and degradation of city life (Munasinghe 1998).

There is a grave need to look at the heritage values of urban space more positively. Today, the concept of urban heritage has expanded towards integration of sustainable development, and retrofitting, a concept that heavily involves with *green architecture*. This is a positive consciousness of the cultural

values of a city image, which necessarily support the continuity of the links between the city and the urban life. By identifying, assessing and clarifying urban heritage and its values, its protection can be integrated with its *wise* use thus strengthening the *container quality* of urban space. Heritage is an asset and its conservation may strengthen city's role as a setting or in other words its ability to contain a living society. We emphasize the need to protect urban heritage within its own socio-cultural context. Our revisiting of the works of Patrick Geddes is to note this particular connection.

Patrick Geddes, a botanist turned town planner from Edinburgh, started improving the living conditions in the run-down quarters of the old town with the assistance of the citizens. He reacted to a grand plan proposed by the municipality to bulldoze those run-down areas. The work was done from the local point of departure with local funds, knowledge and effort, and above all with the enlargement of awareness among the citizens. He found a mechanism to strengthen the *liveability* of the old quarter through renovation to the extent of attracting the academic life back. Geddes furthered this idea of improving the *liveability* of urban space in India and in Palestine around 1914-1925. He called this approach as *conservative surgery*. The modernistic architects and planners paid no attention to conservative surgery until 1950s. Geddes is not totally forgotten as a protagonist of preserving surviving city structures. His ideas are now reappearing in urban planning circles. Their impact on urban conservation, which has mostly lost its way, is rather significant.

Geddes, as a biologist, had carried out extensive research on plants and primitive animals. He applied the theory of evolution to towns. Later, focusing onto sociology and town planning, he used the process town's

evolution as a basis in his work. Beside Darwinian Theory of evolution, he was influenced by scholars such as Frederic Le Play (sociology), August Comte (positivism), Elisee Reclus (geography), and Piotr Kropotkin (anarchism) and John Ruskin (architecture and economics). He perfected a multi-scientific approach to understand the city as a versatile influential factor in people's lives or in other words the *container quality* of the city- the city's strength to contain its society. "To Geddes, not only the buildings as historical objects were important in an old city, but first and foremost as healthy interactivity between people and the environment as possible, the propping up of the people and development of the city" Koponen (2000). Geddes noted the significance of in-depth studying of the city and its regions in order to understand the local, social, cultural and architectural evolution (Leonard 1998). His premise was to *diagnose before treatment or reading, interpreting and designing*. He studied the making of the city before designing its new additions. The other essential facet of Geddes' work was the close rapport with local inhabitants. He noted the importance of educating locals in order to make them responsible for the protection of their own city. Geddes started a centre for local studies called Outlook Tower in Edinburgh, and organized a mobile planning exhibition to educate locals.

Today, we note the relevance of enlarging local awareness,⁵ as it assigns responsibilities to true guardians- the locals. We could further argue that by taking the evolving local values to the centre of discussion making in conservation, the inherent values of an urban space can be proclaimed. Conservative surgery, as a whole, allows adding, removing, replacing or altering aspects of urban space without losing its essence thus improving its liveability. As such, conservative surgery necessarily

deals with the *container quality* of the urban space.

Conservative Surgery

Social processes and spatial forms, as we know, are related. There is always an impact on the social structure if the spatial forms are changed as a result of new developments or as a result of monument conservation. This may challenge the organic relationship between people and their spaces. This means a more subtle approach that respects the evolution of society and urban space is needed to enhance the *liveability* of the city. Geddes' conservative surgery is such an approach that designs subtle changes without losing the society for strengthening the *container quality* of the evolved space. He first introduced this in the works carried out in Edinburgh but it came to light more in his attempts to prevent the costly plans to reorganize dense Indian cities by the colonial rulers. He writes,

The method of conservative surgery, on the other hand, brings out different and encouraging results; first it shows that the new streets prove not to be really required since, by simply enlarging the existing lanes, ample communication already exist; secondly that, with the addition of some vacant lots and a removal of a few of mostly dilapidated and unsanitary houses, these lanes can be greatly improved...

Jacqueline (1947)

It is noteworthy that this strategy respects the interdependency of space and society.⁶ The continuity of physical determinants of an urban space, concepts that are attached with that space and the activities that are accommodated in it are essential for the locals to occupy and dwell the particular urban space. The particular convergence of the three aspects directly deals with the *container quality* of the urban space. The conservative surgery addresses the need to strike a balance between these

elements in their evolution in order to ensure the continuity of that particular convergence, causing a continuous occupation of urban space. Geddes has noted that the conservative surgery demands strenuous field work and it cannot be done in the office with the ruler and the drawing board. He correctly understood the significance of the way of life of Indians and how those cul-de-sacs had become places of life.⁷ If converted into thoroughfares, there would be no life. In addition, the city was full of other urban spaces that accommodated different activities during day and night. The colonial-enforced city of New Delhi and the modernistic Chandigarh witness to the lack of city life as predicted by Geddes. The deterioration of the *container quality* of the urban space is a result of not responding to the cultural values of the place. This has resulted in many historic cities that went through monument-based conservation, in which obsolete urban fabric has been sacrificed to beautify the surroundings of the monument for the sake of developing these as tourist destinations.⁸ Contrary, the report on Lahore notes,

Geddes viewed the decaying and obsolescent area not as a part of the city to be razed to the ground in the name of sanitation and hygiene but as a living part of the ever changing city pattern, a part which had to be radically improved and altered, but in a manner which would retain as much as possible of the existing that was good and allow the life and working of the area to continue uninterrupted and the area so remain a living part of the city.

Conservative surgery is not a method independent of other aspects of the city. It is also not an isolated effort to protect individual monuments. It rather reinforces the existence of those monuments and their accrued values within the present day social and cultural landscapes. This attitude is compiled of various strategies developed by Geddes

since experimenting with cities (Jacqueline 1947). It includes ways to activate people to participate in order to raise the quality of their neighbourhoods, to give people back their lost respect for their city space by showing their values; to strengthen people's trust by respecting their local culture, social habits, monuments and historical boundaries, and to add new activities and buildings that are necessary for a living society (Powell, P & Shibli, K 1965). We find the urban conservation programmes in Ferrara as one of such cases where *life goes on* without any difficulty after implementing the conservation project. The success of Ferrara can be attributed to the conservation planning that has evolved along with the value system of the city. The historic York and Bath also accommodate new additions and have developed detailed urban guides and urban briefs to manage the change as per the society development programmes.

A very little known of Geddes' work in India. It has been understood as narrow-minded as tender renewal of slums. The ideas of Geddes were made known to the modern town planners by Lewis Mumford, Patrick Abercrombie, and Jacqueline Thrywhitt. His disciples were protagonists of a new era, that of new modernism. His ideas were interpreted to meet the demands of this new outlook on urban planning. New interest in the works of Geddes started to emerge at the beginning of 1950s. The publication of a simplified version of Valley Section of Geddes, entitled *Doorn Manifesto* by the Team 10 was the spring board for this new awareness. The latest to adopt Geddes' work is the city green movement. However, he is mostly known as a modern city planner.

Most importantly Geddes acknowledges the totality of a city and how its components evolve as a totality to support the continuity of life. Rossi (1984) notes, "the city is not just a physical thing but all of its history,

geography, structure and connection with the general life of the city". Geddes noted various facets of evolution: ecological and geographical contexts, and economic and social processes. Each successive sub-society reinterprets the urban space and leaves its particular reinterpretation as a legacy thus further diversifying the urban space. Following his idea, it is possible to emphasize that the composed urban quality in the particular cultural context as the urban heritage at the given time. This also means that the urban heritage value may change along with the socio-cultural evolution thus new values emerging and old values submerging.⁹ This definition would allow us to note the unique urban quality of each urban space and their inter-relationship that reflects an evolving hierarchical order that informs the learned behaviour of individuals who live there as a group. This proposes that the built elements shall be protected along with their contexts, processes, functions, activities and users.

Again, by revisiting Geddes we find the importance of these local cultures, and the essential need to place the protected urban heritage in their hands. As a concept as well as a policy, conservative surgery fits very well with the type of conservation we are proposing- one that rejuvenate the historic city.

Following Geddesian principles

Giancarlo De Carlo, Italian architect/planner who was a member of the Team 10, used Geddes's ideas in architectural designs. His new designs were understood as additions and alterations to existing situations. When he was assigned the task of making an urban design for Urbino in 1966, De Carlo started applying this tested theory on an urban scale. In the general plan for Urbino, revitalisation of the city with the assistance of the local people and

university is mentioned. The conservation of historic social and physical structures was noted as a key issue. The long association with Urbino allowed De Carlo to *read* the requirements of the historic city and its surroundings. The drafting of the general plan was framed by the regional, social and historical survey, and continued with the reading, analysing and planning new strategies for the town and for its people. University and cultural tourism as a means for survival, he restored a clear relationship between historical city and surrounding landscapes. He chose a few projects within the city centre to set example for conservation strategies. Among these was the university started with the restoration of old buildings in the centre and a new campus outside the old city (De Carlo 1970). It was clear that all efforts of De Carlo were to reinforce the strength of urban spaces in order to end the degeneration of the city and degradation of city life. He found a new equilibrium in the resources of *culture travel*, which essentially brought more diversity into the city centre.

The most widely published example of conservative surgery in Urbino has been the Faculty of Education- II Magistero. By demolishing inferior parts or secondary structures, room has been made for new additions. City is made to function and healthier use of old, with new structures reinforcing the old.¹⁰ De Carlo noted four most significant parameters in Urbino: Ambiguity between man-made and natural, all the surrounding rural landscape is transformed by man and all man-made in city is natural: Lack of a sharp clear-cut boundary between city and landscape, the landscape coming within the city walls in form of gardens and city comes out in the form of built islands like the monastery of Bernardino: Unity of material in old centre, paving, walls, and roofs are of burnt bricks with infinite variations: the domestic

character of architecture in the centre and on outside looking towards countryside it is made magnificent (De Carlo & Nicholin 1978). In Il Magistero, there is a deliberate lack of congruency between interior and exterior. This idea of separating the inside from outside makes it possible to fit in a larger interior space of the Faculty of Education. The efforts of De Carlo have strengthened the originality of these architectural edifices yet without losing their connectivity with and within the city. As such, this conservative surgery was able to facilitate the city dwellers' identifying and orientating themselves in the city. Urbino, once compared with Bologna where the plot division patterns and building types were given priority thus recreating them at the expense of man-society-environment relationship, stands as a success for strengthening the *container quality* of the city. Urbino did not lose its life, its evolutionary layers, or its monuments- but shaped a new equilibrium between these in order to witness to a cultural continuity.

An urban conservation that took place in Kreutzburg, Germany produced similar results after following the principles laid down by Geddes. Hardt Walther Hamer was the architect/planner responsible for this. Local authorities accepted a set of 12 principles for careful urban renewal presented by him. The most significant principles were:

1. The renewal must be oriented to the needs of present inhabitants and be planned jointly with them. The fabric must be preserved;
2. There must be agreement between users and those who carryout measures;
3. Trust and confidence must be re-established among local people to ensure their co-operation;

4. Renewal must be carried out in stages in order to avoid economic and social issues and burdens;
5. The possibilities contained within the housing stock should be taken advantage of;
6. The townscape should be improved little by little through limited demolition, planting of gardens in block interiors and the design of facades and gable walls;
7. Public amenities must be renewed and supplemented according to needs. (De Carlo & Nicholin 1978)

By dividing his work plan into six categories, Hamer detailed these as: first maintaining the block structure, demolishing a few sections of the building, converting interior courtyards into gardens, and saving outbuildings and workshops for common use, second renovation and modernisation while keeping 95% of the tenants, third allowing new construction on empty plots as infill, fourth use of street spaces more efficiently without losing the traditional materials such as small paving, cobbles, etc, fifth to improve social and cultural facilities, and sixth to promote the liveability of public space.

Anarchism, social evolution, infinite growth and progress, possibilities to change human beings by accelerating evolution etc, were the basic ideas that framed the thinking of Geddes. His followers proved this more practically than Geddes himself. It is possible to note the freshness of the *ever topical* ideas on urban conservation what he termed as conservative surgery. Geddes formed a rather complete and generalist way of planning cities as totalities, linking their past, present, future and their man, society and environment. Most importantly, these conserved cities have not lost their socio-

cultural contexts for being placed within the current value system of the local society that has evolved with the historic city. By paying due attention to the perception of the everyday users of the urban space, the conservation plans in both Urbino and Kreutzborg have designed the way specific to the particular cities without globally-typifying them.¹¹ Urban space, promoting various types of living, continues as the setting for place making as conservation promotes further diversification of the urban space rather than trimming them in the name of authenticity.

Concluding Remarks: Dwelling in Urban Space

Urban conservation has been a reaction against the massive destruction that took place in historic cities in the name of modernization in 1950s. Since the saga of losing historic monuments gave birth to urban conservation, which had then been inadequately defined as conservation of cities, urban areas, and urban monuments, its principles were largely derived from monument conservation. In addition, many of those involved in urban conservation were connected with restoring historic monuments. As such, the systems adopted has been authoritarian and hierarchical, choosing monumental buildings over cityscapes, and dividing the building stock into different categories based on their universal, international, national, regional or local importance. This was further strengthened by the works of many historians and architects. Dawning of theorists such as Geddes, Morris, Giovannoni, and practitioners like De

Carlo, Hamer brought forward alternative strategies. We know that only some fragments of Geddes' projects were ever realised. His concepts can be noted in more contemporary works, and their re-interpretation would help us designing a better living space as cultural continuities in the city thus, strengthening the continuous occupation of city spaces and as such continuous cultural evolution.

The physical fabric is the most impressive and tangible witness to the continuous urban splendour and the particular origin is the most eventful in terms of creating a unique character of a place. By petrifying the characters or recreating them according to conjectured images of the past means a cultural discontinuity for not respecting the links between heritage and society as Geddes attempted to show through his work. One may even argue to the extent that if there is no society to proclaim or appreciate, that particular past would not become an inheritance. Proclaiming a city as a cultural heritage shall not promote the values of some sub-societies while discriminating others. The ejection of life as a result may peel off certain layers of the city thus making it a lost-heritage. By shifting the focus towards understanding the origins and how they have grown up thus, reflecting the current decoding of the environmental meanings of the past, urban conservation shall promote the continuous dialog between space and its dweller rather than its inhabitant (Heidegger 1958). This is the most valuable lesson to be learnt from Geddes. Redefining conservation as a cultural activity, thus signifying urban space may support a more humane sustainable development of the city.

Notes

1. Mumford, Lewis (1938) *The Culture of Cities*, wrote that the City is a product of earth, a fact of nature, man's method of expression.

Schouten (1995) notes that heritage is a past processed through mythology, ideology, nationalism, local pride, romantic, or just plain marketing into a commodity.

Giovannoni (1932) notes the conservation of urban areas, which are *composed of both monumental and minor architecture*. 'Italian Norms for the Restoration of Monuments' ICCROM, Rome P.2

The capital of Poland, Warsaw was more or less completely destroyed by bombing and rebuilt with the use of measured drawings done by the students of the University of Warsaw.

Most of the conservation attempts that are rated as successful; for example Ferrara, Bruges, have empowered the locales to take the responsibility of urban heritage.

The concept of Social of Space proposed by Hillier and Hanson (1984) also supports this way of appreciating urban space. They have noted that the city layout is determined by the social logic of space, which would mirror the social relationships, social perceptions, and pure socialising.

It is a fact that the British imperialists sought to convert these cul-de-sac into thoroughfares in order to move their artillery faster thus avert possible mutiny. Refer Oldenberg VeenaThalwar (1984) *The Making of Colonial Lucknow*, Princeton University Press for a discussion on the modernisation of Lucknow.

Munasinghe (1998) documents such cases of degradation of life in many World heritage Cities.

Value of heritage changes with time as the society goes through a process of evolution. Munasinghe (2003)

Zucchi used the term 'urban surgery' instead of 'conservative surgery' as De Carlo adopted notions of 'participation' and 'reading' from Geddes.

Enlisting a city on the World Heritage List for its *universal significance* has always resulted in such a global- typifying, thus helping the global culture to classify a city but making it rather foreign to locals who do not necessarily understand those values.

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