

**Place - memory - meaning:  
Preserving intangible values in monuments and sites**

**The regeneration of the Symbolic Gardens of the Scots College:  
A learning process in contact with Nature and History.**

**Sabine Kraus**

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Scots College  
RECTORATE-DAFPEN  
533 Avenue Paul Parguel – 34090 Montpellier

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## INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Trained as an architect, I undertook a research in History of Medicine focusing upon Vitalism, of which Montpellier and Edinburgh were the two leading medical centers in the Age of Enlightenment. William Cullen and Paul Joseph Barthez were physicians whose philosophy was to study Nature 'as a whole', and human nature within 'the web of Life'. This cross-channel study of Vitalism leads me to meet the Victorian polymath and university militant Patrick Geddes in June 2009 at the Burn House library, a unique study centre hosted in a 18th century manor and parc located on the lower flanks of the Highlands of Scotland. Through *Biology*, and *Evolution*, I discovered one of the greatest biologists of his time, and one of the prominent leaders of the Scottish school of neo-vitalism, who pioneered a vision of town-planning in the line of the Greek *Polis*, whose duties are the care and education of its citizens. While teaching Sociology at Bombay's University since 1919, Geddes is afflicted by health troubles and has to leave India. In 1924, at the age of 70, he settles in Montpellier and acquires an old and rocky farm of about seven hectares located on the heights of the city. First international students' Centre in France, the Scots College is conceived by his founder as a place for study and a place for life: "Vivendo Discimus", *by leaving we learn*. This unique place, associating natural and build heritage, is currently occupied by the Academic delegation for staff training. At Geddes' time, the Hindous Pavilion hosted Josias Braun-Blanquet research laboratory SIGMA, International Station for Alpine and Mediterranean Botany. Through his work with Geddes, Braun-Blanquet founded the Zurich-Montpellier school of Plant Sociology.

Besides of its broad international spreading, the Scots College is also a symbol of the cultural and scientific history of the city itself. Montpellier is a town developed around the nucleus of its long-standing illustrious medical faculty and botanical garden, embedded in Rabelais' humanism and Reformation. The protestant colleges network of the Southern elbow was predominantly directed by Scottish regents, and in the States-of-Languedoc, most of them were trained in medicine at Montpellier. At the faculty, the vitalist tradition inherited from Hippocrates and Aristotle was renewed through the emerging science of botany based on field-observations, and attracted many foreign naturalists and physicians, mainly from Great Britain. Thus, Vitalism sowed the seeds of ecology by reconnecting living organisms with their physical, cultural and social environment, and with each other. Geddes always claims his vitalistic methodology, taking in account this holistic approach of man in nature, and of education as a factor of evolution. Throughout his work, Geddes constantly transferred his scientific knowledge into social and educational practices, thinking of 'Life in evolution as the union of Nature and Civilization'. As such, Geddes' Scots College and the medical faculty with its botanical garden are the two meaningful symbols of Vitalism in the city of Montpellier, as well as of the long-standing tradition of friendly exchanges with the British Islands.

But with the time, Geddes' work and the Scots College fell into oblivion. At the announcement of a possible future sale to town developers, no care was taken about this unique place, where one can have a direct experiment of Geddes' thought and *genius loci*. Thus, by June 2010, I began to initiate research work and public actions such as web site, symposium, communications, exhibition and commented visits during two years in order to spread Geddes' work through Montpellier. Gradually, the Scots College became afresh a part of the collective memory of the city, with a new awareness of the historical and scientific

value of the place.

From September 2012, I have also led an international campaign asking for protection request letters to be addressed to the Regional Direction of Cultural Affairs at Montpellier. The Patrick Geddes Memorial Trust also took an active part in the campaign, by inviting me at Edinburgh in April 2013 in order to give a presentation of the historical meaning and current situation of the Scots College. In addition with the realisation of the scientific dossier asked by the Heritage Commission, the whole place has finally been protected as part of the French National Historical Heritage on the 19th December 2013, “owing to its significance in terms of history of art and knowledge, as much as to its creator’s scientific magnitude, a thinker internationally recognized for his work on the relationship between biology, man and his environment.”

Yet, as time goes by the Symbolic gardens have been damaged and needed to be renovated. But it is of evidence that Geddes monument at Montpellier is not only a material, but above all an immaterial heritage. The living heritage of the Scots College is the intellectual heritage of its creator’s thought, teaching methods and practices. The restoration of the tangible heritage of the gardens is intimately interweaved with the safeguarding and transmission of Geddes’ knowledge and teaching to further generation. Thus, the life that Patrick Geddes brought into the gardens has also to be regenerated through educative activities. I began to work on a proposal grounded in Geddes’ principles and historical meanings of the place which could offer a new kind of educational experience bridging research and action. By linking cultural and scientific heritage education to landscape-gardening apprenticeship, a sustainable development of both gardens restoration and maintenance as much as meanings safeguard and transmission will be implanted in a lasting way. The project first phase of works took place at the Scots College in the course of 2016-2017, by applying Geddes’ methods, use of the gardens and *figures of thought* embodied in the place during the field schools of the apprenticeship center J. J. Rousseau in Montpellier.

## SURVEY: DIAGNOSTIC BEFORE TREATMENT

### 1. Material Heritage: A great variety of gardens

Geddes’ College is located on the top of one of the hillocks North West of the Montpellieran plain. The Symbolic gardens are located on the steepest slope of the rocky hill, which is crowned by a flat area, on which are the two pavilions: the Scottish pavilion with its *Outlook Tower*, built by the Montpellieran architect Edmond Leenhardt, and the Hindous pavilion, built by Franck Mears, Patrick Geddes’ son-in-law. North East of the site, a great area of wild landscape, a typical southern garrigue, is used for the study of the **natural geographical milieu**. The gardens follow the rocky slope by modelling the relief with typical terraces in restanques, sustained by dry limestone walls, in which stairs have been incorporated. This practice is a traditional craft of the Mediterranean regions, where this technique is an efficient answer to relief constraints and heavy rains intensity. If the difference of level between two terraces is not higher than one meter, the East side of the *Outlook Tower* overlooks an old quarry.

The **diversity** of the **ground** affords a wide range of **varied gardens**: plantations of fruits, vegetables, and flowers, a natural reserve for local herbaceous flora and insects, a rock and quarry garden, a botanical garden. All of them are used for scientific studies, as well as for the life of the inhabitants of the place. On the humanistic side, an open-air theater has been laid out for musical and literary performances. Immediately next to the South West terraces of the Scots pavilion, the Symbolic gardens embody the history and knowledge of civilizations. However, the general composition of the gardens has altered with time, by successive land ownership reorganisations, by lack of botanical and agricultural activities that maintained the gardens, and by the growth of vegetation. Some of the dry limestone walls have crumbled, and winding paths through the hill side have dissolved in the weeds. Nevertheless, the site always bears the traces of its author's design process.

## 2. Immaterial Heritage: The Gardens of Thought

Geddes is attracted by Montpellier's famous tradition among all Universities as oftenest and longest the **capital of botany**, first in the middle ages, with the 'Lily of Medicine'. Following this **living tradition**, Josias Braun-Blanquet, student of Geddes' old friend Charles Flahault, has created a research laboratory in geobotany and **plant sociology** hosted at the Scots in 1930. The **aim** of the **Sots College** is meanly to supplement the personal work of each and the regular teaching of the University by a more **general culture**. In the words of its founder, "it seeks to harmonize the too dispersive character of modern studies by bringing together the naturalist and the humanist at present too much divided: Science too indifferent to the Humanities and the Humanities or Letters, or Arts as we say in Scotland, insufficiently related to Science. [...] Thus, to one main idea of this place, as an experimental and free growth, as a more vital educational growth, not only with ideals and with studies, but also in touch with nature, and active in rural labour and in building too, and all with something of example and impulse to the village around."

Geddes and his friends recognize **education** as a **factor of evolution**. They were also part of an international movement led by biologists, physicians and educators like Maria Montessori who have founded new educational methods and education sciences. This concern for children education emerged among vitalist philosophers and physicians in the course of Enlightenment. Indeed, the entire place is thought by Geddes as an **organic whole**, providing "all the resources of naturalistic and historic environment, for life and studies together, in fact a fuller and more varied environment than has been any heretofore; richer for the senses, and more educative accordingly." As evidenced by Philip Boardman and Andrew Lochhead, two former residents at Geddes time, "we were immersed in nature and history, and not in books, we learned by leaving. [...] In fact, the grounds of the Scots College were laid out in the most unusual outline of human history and knowledge that any man ever attempted. Everything from the Stone Age up to the twentieth century apparently had its place in the general plan of quarries, grottoes, paths, walls, terraces, alleys, shrub-formations, and flowers beds." Thus, the staging of Geddes' thought at the Scots College is actually his final **book to read** as much as a **theater of memory to experience**.

## MEANS OF TREATMENT: CULTURE AND EDUCATION

### 1. Teaching methods and practices as part of the Scots College intellectual heritage

Addressing to university thinkers, Geddes' want for **active ethics** in knowledge transmission and education is strongly highlighted:

“What if the long-dreamed synthesis of knowledge, which thinkers have commonly sought so much in the abstract and by help of high and recondite specialisms, [...], all too apart from this simple world of nature and human life be really more directly manifest around us, in and along with our surveys of the concrete world? [...] And, if it be claimed that beyond the highest speculative education is the active, the ethical, may we not add to our surveys, service? And to our going about, doing good? It may well be among the less specialised and least municipally powerful members of the community that the civic enthusiasms and energies of the opening future may be most vitally awakening. And this not only among the workers, and the artists who at their best most truly voice them, but also among women, and among the children of our schools.” (*Cities in Evolution*, Geddes, 1915).



Implying the youth in **gardening activities** was one of Geddes **active methods**. From the 1880s, he involved the children of the Old Town Edinburgh, at the time the worst slum over Europe, in gardening activities for the benefit of the **inhabitants' health and well-being** as well as for the **health and beauty of the city**. The entire site of the Scots College being a place of culture and education, of science and art associating “savoir and savoir-faire” (theoretical and practical knowledge), the **patrimonial dimension** embodied by the Scots College is also the cultural heritage of **traditional craftsmanship**, which is the **intelligence of the hands**, so often emphasized by Patrick Geddes. The evolutionary biologist strongly appeals for a new age of **social evolution** with the reunion of **arts and sciences** with **labour**: “Man is born to labour also; his hands have made him wise; the complex brain not merely or mainly growing up in vacuo or in abstracto nor even in encyclopaedia, as one school of educationists after another has falsely thought and wrongly applied, but as we now begin to see and to apply, in intimate interaction also with the skillful and strenuous hand. Science, no

less than fine art, is essentially of the working class. Like art it is craft-experience, craft-skill, craft-initiative, for the scientist more reflective, as for the artist more impassioned. Science is always observing, inquiring - blundering therefore also - with the prentice; is in fact a perpetual apprentice.” (*Evolution*, Geddes and Thomson, 1912).

Regenerating the gardens with craftsmanship apprentices is in line with Geddes’ methodology and teaching, according to his motto “*Creando Pensamus*”, *by creating we think*, and belongs also to his claim for the **rising tide of a new vitalism** impulsed by the youth.

## 2. The need of a synoptic vision

During the field schools, particular emphasis has been given on the **unity** of the three *Thinking Machines* as conceived by Geddes and actualized at the Scots: the *Outlook Tower*, together with bas-reliefs representing the triad *Place-Work-Folk* and the *Valley Section*. These *figures of thought* have **geographical, ecological and historical** characteristics, by involving the integration of **social, environmental and economic** underpinning of **Sustainable Development**. This synoptical device offers not only the means to give an account of the relation of human societies with their environment, but also to link different viewpoints in a global visual approach of a living nature, vast **depository of labor** achieved by preceding generations.

The need of a synoptic view being borrowed from **Aristotle** by Patrick Geddes, Greek philosophy enters the play. We have explained that they were in fact the first to observe and study nature in a scientific way. Aristotle’s *History of Animals* reminds us that **man is an animal among others**, and as such, **depending on nature**. Philosophical notions are supposed to be difficult to access in the framework of technical apprenticeship, but when transmitted in a more familiar way, they can be understood by the pupils. Furthermore, the **transmission** of this kind of knowledge is easier at the Scots, because it does not go through books in classroom, but **in direct contact with nature**, through the layouts and bas-reliefs with which we are a direct contact in a natural environment.

It is this historical and scientific past still living at the Scots College, and unfolded through a variety of gardens, that has attracted the **enthusiastic attention** of the budding landscape gardeners, learning with **heart, hand and head**. As also pleaded by Geddes’ American friend John Dewey, “Give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking; learning naturally results.”

## 3. Apprenticeship and cultural heritage

Cooperation with teachers was fruitful. On the occasion of maintenance of the elements structuring the **natural and historical environment** of the site, a dialog appears between these two domains. Through the alliance of **knowledge** and skilled **craftsmanship**, learning takes a **practical value** from the viewpoint of natural sciences as much as from the viewpoint of history and literature. This knowledge becomes easier to memorize because it is transmitted through **manual activities respecting and caring** for nature. In his writings, Patrick Geddes points out that France, by its **geographical** location, is the ellipse that

connects the **Mediterranean** to the **North Atlantic**. This observation is shaped in a concrete manner by gardens, through the staging of **Greek** and **Celtic** antique civilizations (gods and goddesses of the Olympus symbolizing the steps of life – Ossian, the Celtic Homer celebrating the four gifts given by life to men). The landscape-gardeners working in direct contact with the artifacts embodying the geddesian narratives, these latter produce the happy effect of stimulating their **curiosity**. The young apprentices found themselves very astonished to take **pleasure in learning history**, a history transmitted not through books, but acquired through **senses, experience and feeling**. And it is known that **aesthetic emotion** is a strong **memorization** vector. Patrick Geddes' vitalist approach of human-ecology includes not only **biological interactions** with environment, but also **emotional reactions** structuring our **simple mental life**.

As some walls needed to be restored, a first session of **dry-stone masonry** apprenticeship took place to repair one of the two walls framing the stairs coming down from the Renaissance garden. In addition, this session affords us also an explanation of the **geological history** of the region. Meanwhile clearing the ivy from the main terrace wall, we also began to remove a lot of earth and humus accumulated over many years at the bottom of the Synthesis terrace just below, of which only the middle Synthesis bench remains, all the rest having crumbled over time and in need of a complete restoration. Suddenly, we bumped into something hard, which appears to be, after further excavation, the pedestal of the **Urn of Metaphysical Economy**. This discovery was a great moment of emotion, enhanced by the fact that it was the encounter with Geddes' applied-human-ecology in economics: "By leaves we live".

#### **4. Cooperation with the people working at the place**

I was taking part with the pupils and teachers to the maintenance and gardening activities, which were harmonized with the work of the only person partly in charge of the annual maintenance of the gardens (about 3,5 hectares). We also took our lunches on the main terrace with the people working there, and **sympathy** begins to run through the whole community. Gradually, as the work goes on enlivened by archaeological discoveries, the gardens partly recovered their clearness, and people became **sensitive** to the past **beauty** of the place. This new awareness involved them to take part of the play.

On the side of **simple practical life**, the terrace of the classification of the sciences becoming too small for the people, the King Arthur's Round Table welcomes many guests at lunch-time. The terrace just below could be cleaned from weeds and arranged to afford a greater space fitting people's **needs** and **feelings**. The Renaissance garden has also lost his original character. In taking in account the local climate with increasing drought, this area could be designed in the manner of a dry botanical garden with aromatic species typical of Mediterranean climate. Botanical gardens are also a recollection of the first university physic gardens started in Renaissance Italy so that physicians could study and use the healing properties of plants. At last, even the idea of cultivating a vegetable garden began to be discussed. On the side of **Humanities**, as an open-air theater existed here, but built on an area which has been sold, a new place needed to be found. The basement of the quarry, with its large flat area at the bottom of the hill and the *Outlook Tower* overlooking it, seemed to afford us some possibility for a quite romantic setting appealing to **imagination** and **creativity** for a **full inner life** towards **expression in effective life**.



## CONCLUSION

Here, the point was not to reproduce the gardens in the exact same manner, it was to conceive an original project inspired by archives but taking in account the occupations and creativity of the people collaborating in this project, as much as new climate conditions. It is to be noted that, out of Benjamin Boardman's drawing of the gardens original plan, this renewal project was not designed before. This project being experimental, only general outlines were given, and the project evolved through the progress of field-workshops and sympathy. People enjoyed the fact that **life** was again in the gardens, brought by the **work** and **joy** of the little apprentices. Propositions slowly came out from sympathy, synthesis and synergy, involving the realization of a shared vision. Thus, all participants became **agents** taking part in a **synergistic cooperation**, a dynamic that the main idea of the place generates itself as an **experimental** and **free** growth, as a more **vital educational growth**. Moreover, this experience of "**nature an history**" allowed us to regenerate the educational **function** of the symbolic gardens and artifacts as **bearers** of **meanings** and **values** in a common space. In fact, the *genius loci*, if we learn to read and listen to him, is an inspiration and a guide towards an "experience and environment richer for the senses, and more educative accordingly, within that harmony and unity of the sciences and the humanities."

Rainer Maria Rilke wrote: "Nature is not a spectacle, nature is shared life." As such, the Scots College gives us the means of a living experience of Patrick Geddes 'Notation of Life' diagram with its four chords unfolded throughout the living and symbolic heritage of his life's work.



**Sabine KRAUS**

Résidence 24, Appt. 611  
23, rue du Faubourg Boutonnet  
34090 Montpellier  
Tél. : 04 67 54 96 69  
06 19 90 29 31  
Email : [34skraus@gmail.com](mailto:34skraus@gmail.com)  
Site web : [metagraphies.org](http://metagraphies.org)

Architecte de formation  
Chercheur en Histoire des sciences  
Présidente de l'association Metagraphies