

Colombo in the 1920s.

PLANNING THE 'GARDEN CITY OF THE EAST'

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By 1918, H1N1 influenza A, more commonly known as the Spanish flu, had claimed the lives of between 20 to 50 million people globally, many of them between the ages of 20 and 40 years old. Ceylon was no exception. The virus entered the island through two of the busiest ports handling high volumes of international passenger traffic – Colombo in the southwest and Talaimannar in the northwest. Colombo linked Ceylon to ports around the world, and Talaimannar was a hub for maritime traffic from southern India.

Disease control (or the lack of it) during the 1918-1919 pandemic in Ceylon was similar to global patterns epidemiologically, in that the disease spread in distinct waves. In Ceylon, cases surged in the latter half of 1918. The Registrar-General for Ceylon recorded that the Spanish flu claimed 41,916 lives from 1918-1919 – the highest ever number of deaths recorded in the island in a single year. Approximately 6.7 percent of Ceylon's population was lost.

In the 1920s, the suburbs of Colombo were experiencing a surge of cases of malaria (along with Bengal) and the effects of flooding. A deadly spike of malarial fever followed in the mid-1930s, affecting 1.5 million lives. In the 1930s, research by the Colombo Municipal Council pegged the spread of plague to plague fleas and shore rats as carriers, rather than to humans. Disease control in the city was a priority. Ceylon was also experiencing malnutrition due to drought, resultant food shortages, particularly of rice, and falling incomes which left more people vulnerable to disease and malaria. Groups such as the anti-imperialist and anti-war Suriya Mal movement too conducted voluntary malaria relief work in the 1930s.

A century later, questions of epidemic, contagion and urbanism have reemerged with COVID-19. The connections and paradoxes of development and improvement in a city (much like the City Improvement Trusts, which were set up in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras in the late 19th to mid-20th century to manage the task of urban development, housing and disease control) compel us to reckon with the histories, successes and failures of planning urban spaces in times of disease. The vision of Colombo as a garden city, with its tree-lined avenues, a city dotted with aquariums, paths and parks promoting garden spaces, horizontal living, health, wellness and house pride is an idea that lingers, and one that is rooted in history.

Geddes and the Garden City

By 1918, city planning was in crisis. The Housing and Town Improvement Ordinance of 1915, which regulated the size and spatial arrangements of buildings in order to allow for direct sunlight and better ventilation, was at risk of being repealed or revised. This was partly due to lack of funding but also because the ordinance made poverty, disease and overcrowding in low-income settlements visible, as urban-planning scholar Nihal Perera notes.



Patrick Geddes



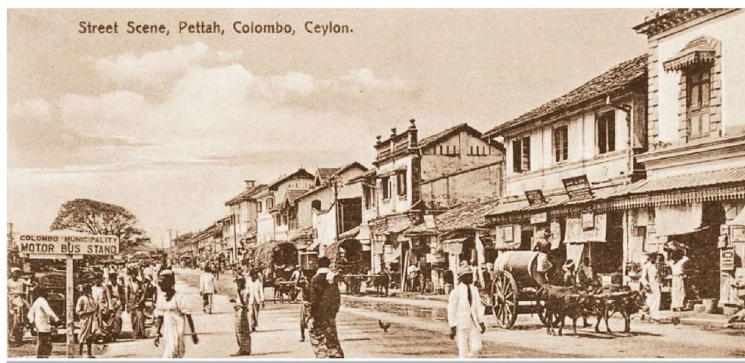
Street Scene, Pettah, Colombo, Ceylon.

Shortly after the ordinance was enacted, for instance, the areas around Kochchikade were declared 'insanitary'. Rather than trying to improve living conditions, authorities were absorbed in trying to amend the ordinance to relax the regulations. This would allow urban growth and building requests to continue haphazardly and unchecked and potentially lead to sanitation and sewage issues. To remedy this, the Board of Improvements, which functioned under the Municipal Council and looked into the maintenance of thoroughfares in the city appealed to the Government to support them in drawing up a 20-year plan for Colombo from 1919.

Patrick Geddes was a peripatetic figure in Asia in the interwar years and during the time of the Spanish flu. His 1921 report *Town Planning in Colombo: A preliminary report* centred around issues of planning for disease prevention, mitigating the effects of flooding and landscaping Colombo as a 'Garden City of the East'.

Geddes was a Scottish Orientalist and town planner. He is perhaps best known for his design of the Outlook Tower in Edinburgh.

His time in Colombo was spent between the University of Bombay and planning assignments in the city of Jerusalem. A critique of Geddes remains that his basic theories were not unique to India or Ceylon but in fact developed by the time he embarked on his first planning experiments in Cyprus as early as 1897, which revealed the rigidity of his practice. In Asia, he contributed to urban-planning design (even though his ideas were often not adopted) across Indore, Bombay, Madras and many other cities in



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the Subcontinent, as well as in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

In *Cities in Evolution* published in 1915, Geddes drew a distinction between what he called the 'paleotechnic' present and the 'neotechnic' future. He argued that the 19th century was an age of 'carboniferous capitalism' based on polluting non-renewable resources. The paleotechnic age saw domination through machines, finance, militarism and as a consequence, the exhaustion of natural resources. Geddes's town planning reflected his hope for a new neotechnic age, relying on renewable solar energy and durable alloys to allow for resource efficiency. Geddes was convinced that Colombo was close to attaining the identity of a garden city and emphasised the need to carefully 'guard' the city as such. The 1921 census estimated a population of over 244,000 living in Colombo, to which Geddes applied the British town planning limit of 50 persons to the acre (or close) to prevent crowding as seen in cities like Bombay.

Deeply influenced by Ebenezer Howard's garden-city movement to prevent slums and overcrowding, Geddes designed a new system aimed at improving living conditions in cities, tailored to their specific cultural and natural backgrounds – Place-Work-Folk. Inspired by French philosopher and writer Auguste Comte and mining engineer Frederic Le Play, Geddes pushed for a 'third alternative', between unrestricted capitalism and socialist state intervention.

Not limited to Geddes, many voices including the movement for socialist utopias of the time take criticism of capitalism as their starting point. Chronologically these ideas also overlapped with the American City Beautiful movement led by architects and reformers, intended to engage with and plan for urban and social issues, most prominent in Cleveland, Chicago and Washington, DC.

Although an admirer of Le Play, Geddes was opposed to the emphasis on wealth accumulation that the Industrial Revolution encouraged as a marker of societal progress. Instead, he was influenced by the ideas of

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Russian anarchist and revolutionary Prince Peter Kropotkin in the idea of cooperation over competition. Geddes and Kropotkin met in Edinburgh over the study of Geddes's work on the Old Town and University Hall – the UK's first self-governing student residence. Kropotkin's ideas aligned with Geddes in that only by studying nature and obeying nature's laws could humans reach a higher level of civilisation. Geddes measured success by the fullness of harvests.

Symmetry vs. open space

The historical moment saw certain European and South Asian cities grappling to combat the ill effects of industrialisation and overcrowding. In the backdrop of the Spanish flu epidemic, Geddes's concept of gardens and horizontal housing planned ahead and promoted wellness and disease control. It is not hard to imagine why his ideas in managing death, disease and overcrowding would have, in theory, appealed to Governor Manning. Perhaps there was another reason for approaching Geddes too.

In December 1914, while attending an Indian National Congress session in Madras, British Governor Lord Pentland introduced the City and Town Planning Exhibition and its director, Geddes, to India. The move was calculated – Pentland was hoping to highlight the benefits of British rule in India to Congress. At a time when there was growing political consciousness, including a movement for independence, in Ceylon, it is not inconceivable that Governor Manning hoped Geddes would help make a similar favourable impression.

As an already established artificial harbour, the Colombo Port planners were looking to increase capacity and growth in more traditional terms. Geddes was in favour of balancing the war memorial designed by Edward Lutens with an arch at the entrance of the Port of Colombo much like the Arch of Empire in Bombay, which he hoped in time would be designed in all of the ports between London and New Zealand. His focus on Colombo's Port wasn't accidental – increased shipping at the end of the First World War had brought Colombo to the unexpected position of the third port of the Empire and fifth in the world.

Governor Manning and the Colonial Treasury were cautious to financially commit to an experienced town planner but estimated the cost at Rs. 50 million for a Town Improvement Scheme, expecting repayment from the Municipal Council. However, the Colonial Treasurer was not confident that the Colombo Municipality, which was on the verge of bankruptcy, could ever embark on such a project by itself. In the press too, the Daily News was intent on the need for town planning and welcomed Geddes, but the Ceylon Observer was lukewarm in its reception of a project that they saw as a drain on municipal resources.

While it would seem that hiring Patrick Geddes indicated a general agreement to the Garden City models he was already well known for, what panned out was a clash between Ceylon officials' expectations for a 'scientific layout' for street planning, vis-a-vis Geddes's commitment to following garden and garden village designs.

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(To be continued...)