



Environment & Society Portal



The White Horse Press

Full citation: Thomas, John L. "Coping with the Past: Patrick Geddes, Lewis Mumford and the Regional Museum." *Environment and History* 3, no. 1 (February 1997): 97–116.
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/2917>.

Rights: All rights reserved. © The White Horse Press 1997. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism or review, no part of this article may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, including photocopying or recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission from the publishers. For further information please see <http://www.whpress.co.uk>.

Coping with the Past: Patrick Geddes, Lewis Mumford and the Regional Museum

JOHN L. THOMAS

*Department of History
Brown University
Providence, Rhode Island 02912, USA*

SUMMARY

The pioneer urban and environmental planner, Patrick Geddes, and his American disciple, Lewis Mumford, dismissed the monumental art museum as an outsized emblem of the garrison state, corporate consolidation, and imperial ambition. In its place they proposed the scaled regional museum serving citizens as a 'civic gallery', and teaching them about their history with its roots in the environment. That environment took the shape of the valley section, a middle-ground home to the folk and a bedrock of 'enduring factors' lying deep in their 'vital past'. Geddes and Mumford's legacy at the end of the 20th century is thus one of regional reconstruction, historic preservation, and heightened environmental awareness.

'I have no faith in the educational value of the commonplace art museum with its metal masterpieces in a glass case and its smithy nowhere', the combative Patrick Geddes complained in his path-breaking report to the Carnegie Dunfermline Trust, *City Development: A Study of Parks, Gardens, and Culture-Institutes* published in 1904. 'This whole museum tradition', he scoffed, 'though too largely in power, answers but to stamp or scalp collecting'.¹ Geddes was convinced that wherever a genuine technical education flourished, it discovered its purpose in seeing and sharing in the 'real work' of building and creating which promised to turn all the old musty collections to new 'right uses'.

Geddes, the voluble Scotch biologist turned urban planner and social visionary, had been a student of Thomas Huxley and an accomplished scientific researcher when in the mid-1880s he turned his attention to economics and the new sociology with hopes of diagnosing and curing the ills of modern industrial society. In the next two decades, Geddes proceeded to explore a variety of the 'right uses' of the past in improving the present and visualising the future. In short order he organised the Edinburgh Social Union, modelled on Samuel Barnett's prototype in London, and provided it with an agenda of urban reclamation and renovation projects. He established a summer school at Edinburgh University with field courses in 'seaside Zoology' and 'garden Botany'

and lectures by the French sociologist Edmond Demolins, the Reclus brothers, geographer Elisée and anthropologist Elie, and the Russian prophet of cooperation, Peter Kropotkin. Then he purchased Outlook Tower on Edinburgh's Royal Mile where he built his own 'civic gallery' and teaching museum as the vantage-point from which to survey and study the 'valley section', his relief model for uncovering former civilisations and reconstructing contemporary ones.²

Geddes's objection to the massive national museums of the late nineteenth century matched his complaint against the modern metropolis that housed their 'pompous imperial art' which seemingly had changed so little since the time of the Caesars. All the great capitals of the Western world – Paris, London, Berlin, New York, and Washington – seemed hellbent on becoming Tyrannopolis, their power and grandeur sustained by state coercion and repression. The truly vital city, Geddes insisted, should boast not of palaces and outsized marmoreal museums lining some grand urban concourse, but of self-governing 'burgher-people' gathered to deliberate in their Town Hall expressing, as the Acropolis and the medieval cathedral had for their distant ancestors, the civic ideals and cooperative values that governed their lives.

Geddes realised that the age of great museums in which he found himself was also an age of national consolidation, economic centralisation, and imperial ambitions for which the Louvre, South Kensington, or the Smithsonian were both repositories and emblems. Neither the proliferation of specialised museums nor their increasing variety of display could soften the impact of the chauvinistic forces behind their formation. Nation-state, metropolitan conglomerate, and monumental museum converged in Geddes's mind to generate, manage, and memorialise a state of 'Wardom' and a garrison readiness which subordinated all creativity to its service.

What a new age of neotechnic innovation and experiment required, Geddes was convinced, was an alternative vision of a healthy culture drawing on a usable past rooted in the regions of the earth and their indigenous peoples and cultures. It was the Napoleonic statistician and pioneer sociologist Frederic LePlay who provided Geddes with his basic formula for regional reconstruction. '*Lieu, Travail, Famille*' – '*Place, Work, Folk*' – formed the substratum of a social history which fascinated Geddes – a bedrock of 'enduring factors' lying deep in a 'vital past' beneath the shallow probings of dynastic and patriotic historians, those 'boys stirred by reading Walter Scott'. All of the turgid political accounts of Macaulay and Michelet, Freeman and Froude, he complained, '... are not histories, but very largely historical novels, tendential fiction in fact'.³ The task confronting the twentieth-century reform-minded historian, on the contrary, involved the regional 'reconstruction' of a vital past and the 'awakening realization and interpretation of the present'. Precisely here could be seen the 'comparative uselessness' of the great national museum, 'what should be our greatest educational treasure-house'.⁴

Regionalism in the nineteenth century consisted of a series of cultural counter-movements sweeping across Europe and, somewhat later, the United

COPING WITH THE PAST

States, revivals that together defined an adversarial alternative to the modern, centralised national state. Cultural regionalism – the recognition of the folk and the celebration of indigenous communities, their languages, ceremonies and rituals – arose when traditional societies fractured under the impact of rapid modernisation, and their peoples, suddenly released from the land and locale, embarked on compensatory searches for cultural forms rooted in forgotten landscapes. Such was the case in Scotland and Wales in response to England's industrial revolution, and with Denmark at midcentury or Spain at century's end. Across the Atlantic regional revivals accompanied New England's industrial transformation in the two decades before the Civil War, then the pell-mell development of Frederick Jackson Turner's Old Northwest in the years following that war, and in the twentieth century the triumph of the New South in the years between the two world wars.

Geddes's vision of a dispersed neotechnic culture proceeded from his conviction that a self-destructive paleotechnic order based on coal and finance capitalism was already hurtling towards its doom. A regional civilisation of valley sections, which would replace it, would centre in the regional city drawing its sustenance, spiritual as well as material, from its immediate environs. The geographer's concept of the valley section served Geddes as a heuristic device for correlating city and surrounding countryside in a three-dimensional topographical model of a river-valley culture extending from central city and rich farmland at the bottom of the natural saucer up the sides through thinner soils and rocky pastures to forests and mountainous wilderness along the rim. Each of the segments of the valley section, according to Geddes, had served as the original habitat of a primary producer, beginning high on wilderness ridges with the miner and the hunter and descending in time as well as space to the woodman, the shepherd, and the peasant-crofter in the uplands to the gardner and the townsman of the regional city at the mouth of a wide estuary out from which ventured the fisherman and the explorer.

Where, then, did the modern city come from? His mythopoetic reading of history – the symbolic recovery of a usable past – gave Geddes his answer. 'These variously occupied folk each come to develop their own little hamlet or village, with its characteristic type of family, and folk-ways, even institutions... In this way their various villages are ranged from fishing port to forest and mountain pass, from gardens and fields below to mine and quarry above.'⁵

Geddes's museum for the emergent neotechnic order was designed to function within this rediscovered and revitalised valley civilisation. For it Geddes proposed an initial word-change: in place of 'museum' redolent of dusty collections mouldering under glass the phrase 'civic gallery' connoting democratic vitality. The neotechnic museum conceived as a regional social laboratory and displaying only a seemly number of artifacts and educational devices would reach out to the people of an entire region and draw them in for instruction in history, art, and technology which they need if they are to preserve, adapt, and plan. The regional museum's assignment is dictated by Geddes's concept of

'civics' that served as the centerpiece of his sociology. Under the terms 'civics' and 'civic education' he ranged geography, economics, history, anthropology, art and architecture, all synthesised in an ongoing *process* of preservation and planning to be conducted by a 'new class' of skilled producers, engineers, artists, and teachers who have broken with the prejudices of more 'conventional and apathetic minds' still in charge of the national museums of the world.

The citizens of Geddes's No Mean City use their civic gallery as a combined art and science museum for cataloging the life of the region – an 'index museum', as he called it, for projects and concerns which are 'industrial and commercial, hygienic and educational, legal and political, cultural and what not'.⁶ In describing its organisation and layout Geddes went into considerable detail. The entrance hall he designed to confront the visitor directly with 'the profusion and confusion of the subject' by adorning it with a 'medley' of old and new – paintings, architectural drawings, landscape elevations, maps and photographs – 'each interesting, but without obvious relation or association to any mind except the owner's'. Progression through this hypothetical museum is ordered psychologically with the intentionally disarranged entrance posing problems of relation and connection – of town to country, past to present, art to science – that only a full tour of the gallery can answer. From the contrived chaos of the Entrance Hall visitors proceed to the first of the galleries, 'Modern Civic Administration' which, Geddes readily confesses, also shows 'but little systematic arrangement, and is mostly alphabetical at best'. From such unpromising beginnings Geddes's viewers retreat into history, first to a room marked 'Classic Cities' and filled with the reminders of the grandeur of Athens and the glories of Rome together with 'indications' of Babylon, Jerusalem, and Constantinople. Then straight through a series of galleries in strict historical progression from exhibits on 'Towns and Cities of the Renaissance' to 'Great Capitals' of the Age of the Baroque and on, finally to modern metropolitan centers of finance capitalism and state bureaucracy, each flaunting one Louvre, one British Museum, one Smithsonian just as each boasts a single War Office.

The historical part of Geddes's gallery tour ends with a visualisation of the neotechnic order, its regional dispersal made inevitable by the imminent collapse of the national state. Twentieth-century culture, Geddes predicts, cannot long remain consolidated: Rome's ascendancy will not be repeated nor will the later cultural hegemony enjoyed by Paris in the Middle Ages or Oxford be resurrected. New civic galleries will distinguish every 'considerable city' that 'seeks to complete itself by creating its own culture from within rather than borrowing it from without'. Thus has Glasgow achieved its independence from Edinburgh, and Liverpool from the dominance of London. 'These typical developments are indicated round the walls [of the civic galleries] city by city', and they invite comparison which can only be made by returning the viewer to the gallery entrance and starting over, this time with children as guides to the topographical and occupational features of the valley section.⁷ To the basal layer of regional history is now added a second 'range' of exhibits depicting the complete

environmental context for the civic gallery as 'city centre' replacing the outmoded paleotechnic museums of art and science. 'A mere piling together of monuments' has become 'a clearing-house of social science and social action'. And with the addition of yet a third range of surveys and projections of future needs Geddes's three-phase gallery tour is complete.

The manageable civic gallery, in replacing the outsized museum of cultural nationalism, reaches out to a participatory community in new ways, collecting altruistic citizens for tours and then propelling them out into the streets of the regional city for interpretive masques, festivals, and processions. At first these participatory rituals comprise the 'main task' of regional reconstruction – the recovery of 'history proper' by which Geddes meant, not 'the blind view of history' of events occurring elsewhere and recorded in books, 'but the very life process of our city, its heredity, and its momentum alike'.⁸ Quickly, however, the civic gallery with its flexible and moveable exhibits becomes the chief instrument of reform and the fashioning of a new social personality for a neotechnic world – cooperative, inventive, generous. 'City by city, our civic ideals emerge and become definite; and in the revivance of our city we see how to work towards its extrication from its paleotechnic evils, its fuller entrance upon the better incipient order'.⁹ Thus conceived and directed, the civic gallery serves as an index-museum for exploring the history of civilisation through the valley section in its myriad forms across the world. The civic gallery, in short, as Geddes's own Outlook Tower.

In 1892 Geddes took a lease on a six-storey stone building at the top of Edinburgh's Royal Mile which he promptly named 'Outlook Tower' and set about furnishing with the displays suitable to his notion of an index-museum. To those visitors hardy enough to endure his interminable discourses Geddes explained just how Outlook Tower held the means for understanding all of the more specialised national museums of the world together with the modern cities that housed them.

A tour of Outlook Tower began with a non-stop climb of five flights of stone steps to a flat roof and a further ascent of a narrow wooden staircase to a cupola and encircling gallery some eighty feet above the ground. From this height the entire city unfolds in a panoramic sweep – Castle Hill immediately below, then out to the Firth of Forth eight miles distant, and beyond on a clear day Ben Ledi and Ben Lomond fifty miles away. Ninety degrees to the northeast stands Calton Hill and the broad inlet fringed with coastal towns looking out to the North Sea. Closer in lie the great Castle on one side, and eastward looking down the Royal Mile, Holyrood Palace. To the south the barren Pentland Hills and the wide valley of the Esk funneling out beyond the Old Town. Together these several views define Geddes's valley section.

Above the circular walkway around the tower and up in the dome above Prospect Roof stands the camera obscura where, as Geddes reminded his visitors, 'for all practical purposes you are inside the bellows of a huge photographic apparatus'. Thrown upon a large white table serving as a screen are

images in heightened colour of the surrounding city and country – Princes Street Gardens, the University, Corstorphine Hill – in a unified vision comprised of ‘outlooks’ that mark the point of departure for a walk down Geddes’s index-museum. The inside of the topmost Octagonal Room is lined with historical charts, botanical exhibits, geological cross-sections, topographical models in profusion and juxtaposed to stretch the viewer’s powers of visualisation literally to the ends of the earth. One of the displays is a meteorological device tracking the passage of the earth through its yearly course; another a depiction of the heavens fixing the earth in its inconspicuous place in the universe. There is an ingenious Episcopo, a hollow globe through which the viewer can see any place on the other side of the world. There are curved maps seen through a distorting lens that reveals the earth as glimpsed from Outlook Tower with nearby Scandinavia in the foreground and distant Asia and the Antipodes perched on the far horizon. Here are the parameters of Geddes’s index-museum which a descent to the ground floor will codify and catalogue.

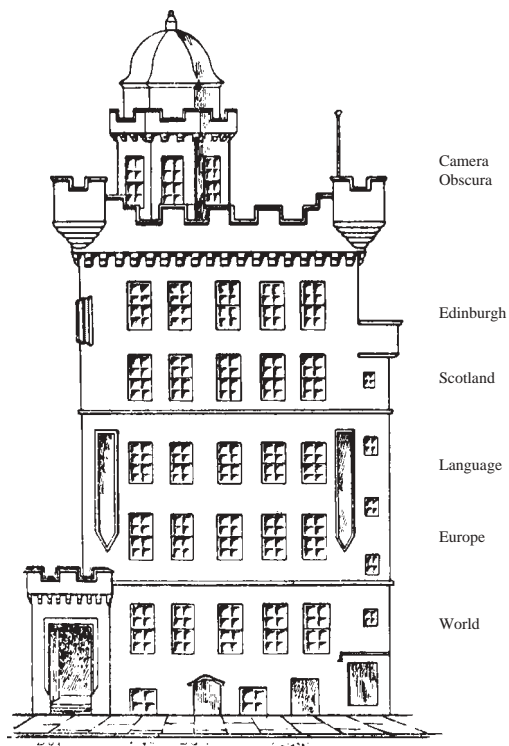


FIGURE 1. Diagrammatic elevation of the Outlook Tower
(after P. Boardman, *The Worlds of Patrick Geddes*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978)

After a mandatory moment of contemplation in the 'Inlook Tower', a tiny cell with stark white walls graced only by a single chair, the gallery-goer is ready for the descent accompanied by the director himself as guide. The tour leads from the regional survey in the Edinburgh Gallery on the fifth floor down through the Scotland Room directly below to an exhibit entitled 'Language' on the third floor and down once again to a gallery marked 'Europe' and then, at last, the 'World' on solid ground. Each floor of the museum teaches its own lessons, most detailed for the Edinburgh rooms whose walls are crowded with photographs, prints, maps, and charts tracing the history of the city and its industrial and artistic achievements, and projecting a future city the creation of citizens dedicated to regional service.

History as record of the past and prediction of the future dominates Geddes's index-museum. In the 'Europe' gallery a huge colored chart stretches across three walls portraying the history of the continent from the fourth to the nineteenth centuries, with bands of purple for the Holy Roman Empire, yellow for invading Goths, green for Moslem expansion. On the stairways between floors appear and reappear other charts constantly improved and shuttled about by the curator in an endless process of rearranging. The most elaborate and prominent of these, fittingly, is the model of the valley section rendered in colored glass and depicting the transit of technology and culture down the river course from primal mountains to open sea.

Geddes meant his valley section model to be universal in applying LePlay's formula of *Lieu, Travail, Famille* to 'that general slope of mountains to sea which we find everywhere in the world'. Edinburgh's 'home view', he explained, found its equivalent throughout Wales, everywhere in England and Ireland, across Norway and Sweden to the Siberian plain. 'Broadly speaking, this is the way the world is built.'¹⁰ The valley section forms a huge natural amphitheatre in which the complete range of 'nature occupations', primary forms of work as Geddes defined them, are played out along a time-line of developing civilisations. Beginning at the top of the valley-section world in the dim recesses of pre-history stands the Miner with his primitive extractive tools that over the centuries are perfected into modern machinery in that 'terrible world of steel, with whose doings history is soon full'.¹¹ Next in temporal as well as topographical descent comes the Woodman whose axes of stone, bronze, and then steel hew highways across the world – once long ago through Gaul to Britain, more recently up the Rhone Valley to Dijon and Paris. The Woodman is the prototype of the inventive, peaceful craftsman – house-maker, boat-builder, furniture-designer, primal engineer with his lever, wedge, wheel, axle, and pulley.

The Woodman's companion and occasional adversary is the Hunter tracking and killing game, first for survival, then for sport, and of late for soldierly satisfaction as 'the maker and leader of war'. In firm opposition to such violence stands Geddes's Shepherd supplied with patience and the arts of diplomacy, the Pastor Pastorum rebuking the Warlord. The Shepherd serves as leader to pastoral peoples the world around, the 'primal caravaner' who eventually becomes

today's railway king. Also spiritual seeker from Saul of Tarsus to modern revivalists.

Further down the valley slope the poor peasant, Scotland's crofter, ekes a subsistence living out of stony soil and manages to put aside his slim surplus against the winter and next spring's planting. Such enforced thrift makes the Peasant, in Geddes's mythicised reading of history, the prefiguration of the modern banker and insurance-company agent. On better land below, his richer relative, the well-to-do Farmer with full barns and ample means, develops his hamlet into a thriving village and ultimately into a walled town with substantial gates and a marketplace. The Farmer, in time, builds the regional city with his produce exchanged for social services provided by the Townsman – land records, police protection, markets together with wineshops and alehouses filled with 'congenial company' with whom to discuss politics. Finally, in the progression down the valley section comes the Fisherman in the river's estuary with an occupation once the monopoly of women but passing over centuries to the hands of men who plow the sea and explore and settle the furthest reaches of the world.

Geddes added two complementary exhibits in his index-museum to give heightened meaning to his valley section schema: an illustrated version of LePlay's triad symbolising the reintegration of the arts and sciences in the habitat; and a window-panel filled with the *Arbor Saeculorum* or Tree of Life bearing all the great works and inventions from the origins of the world to the present. Geddes's tree roots in the fires of life from which smoke spiralling upwards intertwines with the branches to obscure one age of man from another until the eye, moving upward and nearing the top, discerns the phoenix-like body of man accompanied by the butterfly Psyche, 'the deathless soul of humanity'. As Geddes's visitor finally reaches the library of geography and travel occupying the ground floor of Outlook Tower, he passes Reclus's great globe on his way to the exit through which he returns to the larger world hopefully renewed and reinvigorated for the work of regional reform and reconstruction.

II

Of all the students and converts of Patrick Geddes the most important is Lewis Mumford for whom the master was first a 'distant teacher' and ultimately an inescapable presence. Mumford first read Geddes as a young man of twenty during the First World War. Geddes, he recalls vividly, led him away from professionalism and specialisation with his emphasis on ecology and the habitat, his celebration of the natural setting and the rustic life balancing and enriching his pupil's metropolitan education. 'Here, then, was a man who sought to embrace every aspect of existence; and who, if he had not taken all knowledge as his province, at least had something challenging to say in almost every sphere of human activity...' ¹² Above all, it was Geddes's call for the new education

available in his index-museum that attracted his trans-Atlantic pupil. Geddes's 'clinical picture' of the social disorders of the modern metropolis, Mumford realised, was offset by his belief in reconstructing the world through cultivation of the region as habitat for the new artist and scientist. Mumford found Geddes's call to action irresistible. 'Years before I met Geddes in person, he taught me how to take in the life of cities, both from inside and from outside, both in time and in space: not as a mere spectator or as a collector of statistics or a maker of abstract models, but, to begin with, as a citizen and a worker, participating in the total life of a community, past, present, and prospective.'¹³

Geddes, the mind at a distance, became a persistent irritant in the summer of 1923 by coming to Manhattan's New School for Social Research to give six lectures on the results and promise of his work at Outlook Tower. Throughout the long and trying summer Mumford followed the master doggedly, waiting for that moment when Geddes would finally stop talking and listen to him. Geddes's impetuosity and volatility, his exuberance and exorbitance, proved a constant annoyance as he settled permanently into temporary quarters graciously offered, took over the New School room by room with his portable index-museum, and spread notes and manuscript across every available foot of space. 'It would have been flattering to think that Geddes had brought his boxes of graphs and charts over for my special benefit', a rueful Mumford reported, 'but the truth is that they were a standard part of his travel equipment...'¹⁴ The climax of their growing intellectual estrangement came in one of the New School's classrooms festooned with the paper parts of Geddes's Thinking Machine when the master ordered him to spend his morning copying on the blackboard, one after another, all of the charts he had been told to memorise. Whatever Geddes's brilliance, the twenty-eight-year-old Mumford realised, he was also wildly eccentric, willful, and domineering. Working with him for any length of time would be a form of self-imposed serfdom. Mumford escaped in a letter to Geddes in which he asked him to strip away the mask of a young 'hack writer' who appeared unwilling or unable to 'follow your talk for more than a couple of hours at a sitting' and to recognise an aspiring young cultural critic 'who publishes his notes and lectures instead of speaking them'. At summer's end he packed Geddes's bags and trunks – 'like putting the contents of Vesuvius back into the crater after the eruption' – and found him a taxi to the boat. They would meet once more briefly in 1925 but continue to correspond regularly and affectionately until Geddes's death in 1932.

By the time of their first meeting, however, Geddes's ideas had already made an indelible impression on Mumford, in particular his index-museum which sent his young American student in search of a habitat suitable for joint occupancy by the arts and sciences. In a fledgling essay, 'The Marriage of Museums', which appeared in the September 1918 issue of *The Scientific Monthly*, Mumford called for a solemnising of the 'new kinship' between art and natural history, one cemented in the act of 'cultural borrowing' that introduced the 'presentiments' of graphic art to the museum of natural history and an organic conception of life

to the museum of art. Learning of a proposal to link New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History by a pathway across Central Park, Mumford saw in the plan a promise to transform the museum from paleotechnic 'storehouse' to neotechnic 'powerhouse' – to redirect its energies from a passive 'showing off' to an active engagement in education and to advance 'from the uninformed miserly tradition of an earlier day to the directed socialised spirit of the opening age'.¹⁵

Mumford extended Geddes's initial objections to the palatial museum by offering a historical as well as a mythological account of its beginnings in 'the robber's cave, the receptacle for princely loot, or the hunter's cache, the repository for animal skins and bleached bones'. In the more prosaic terms of the historian he traced the modern museum and the contemporary collector's instinct to the seventeenth-century country house and the appearance of what a later historian has called 'possessive individualism' – the defining and asserting of self in the act of acquiring and owning. Treating art as personal property and natural science as an adjunct of sport, Mumford agreed with Thorstein Veblen and Geddes, subordinated aesthetic values to the cash nexus and scientific knowledge to the trophy on the wall. 'To follow this tradition is not so much to promote science and art as to add renown to the hunter and the warrior, as they existed in their past nakedness or in the various thin disguises of today: commercialist and art collector, country gentleman and explorer.' The acquisitive tradition emerging from this penchant for display puts modern society 'at the mercy of every rich ignoramus' with an itch for immortality. Perhaps museums cannot refuse such gifts – at least not too often – but they can help check the trend toward indiscriminate collecting by creating a certain environment within their walls and then trusting to natural selection to weed out the aesthetically or scientifically unfit.

Abandoning the tradition of museum as warehouse, Mumford agreed with Geddes, would make of it 'a concrete theater of history' in which viewers could follow life 'from region to region and period to period'. In the decentralised society of the future, which a modern technology of electricity and alloys was already helping to create, the regional museum would play a crucial role in giving collection and presentation 'a common social end'. Scaled to the region, the neotechnic museum would supply citizens with a usable past for rebuilding a war-ravaged world of clashing nationalisms. In the museum of the future, Mumford insisted, art and aesthetics will join with science and the instinct for knowledge in a shared habitat as the common ground for the creative process. Since art is closely bound to life, he argued in taking a position he would soon relinquish, any arbitrary separation of the two simply isolates the processes of life from those rich patrons who proceed to substitute their own labels and systems of classification for real life. Biotechnic man, on the contrary, will put his art at the service of science and in turn use that science to frame his art. With this simple reciprocal act he will return to the artist the lost opportunity for public service 'which disappeared with the decline of the Middle Ages and the

usurpation by the leisure classes of the artist's talent for gratification of idiotic whimsies'.

Mumford quickly jettisoned this attempt to reunite art and science in the museum, but his faith in regionalism and the conviction that it held the key to understanding the past and predicting the future grew stronger with the years. The alternative to bloated empires and warlike nations, he agreed with Geddes, lay in a solution to the problem of scale: 'some day we may learn to scale these enterprises down a little; and as we did so, and created a smaller framework for social life, the artist in America would possibly find an opportunity to produce ... deeply authentic, imaginative works...'. Mumford first prescribed the region as a cure for metropolitan decadence in an early work, *The Story of Utopias* (1922) in which he examined in an admittedly cursory fashion literary utopias from Plato to Bellamy before proceeding to anatomise the modern dystopias of the baroque Country House, industrial Coketown, and twentieth-century Megalopolis. His diagnosis called for transcending the national state with its metropolis by surveying the regions of America in order to disclose to its people an enduring 'non political grouping with respect to soil, climate, vegetation, animal life, industry, and historic tradition'.¹⁶ In this, his first book, he located the ideal commonwealth, as Geddes had, in the 'city region' most fully realised in the original Greek *polis*, a perfectly scaled community centred 'in what the geographers call the "valley section"'.¹⁷

As Mumford took up the task of extending and applying Geddes's ideas, regionalism in the United States was rapidly acquiring a variety of meanings in the minds of writers, critics, and would-be reformers. Regionalism signified, first of all, a host of actual schemes, both public and private, for upgrading, reforming, or reconstituting the geographical sections of the nation. By the mid-1920s academicians at the University of North Carolina and the University of Chicago, for example, were busy laying the theoretical foundations for regional development and reclamation projects many of which would come to fruition during the Depression as exercises in 'regional planning'. These proposals involved fitting the American people to their indigenous landscapes and meeting their needs as variously defined by administrative reports, demographic projections, rehabilitation schemes, conservation measures and cultural revival. As a system of values and a set of aesthetic forms outlined by Patrick Geddes and now expounded by his American student 'regionalism' meant, first and foremost, a 'cultural motive' which Mumford alluded to in a letter to Geddes explaining his determination to inject 'a little regionalism' into the whole regional planning enterprise. For Mumford as for Geddes regionalism pointed to ecologically balanced and aesthetically harmonious communities scaled to their environs and filled with energetic citizens busy perfecting a participatory politics and inventing new cultural forms. In this broader sense Mumford and the regionalist writers and critics in the two decades between world wars were bent on recasting the modern cultural world in a regional mould by utilising inherited and constructing new social forms fitted to the dispersed regional way of life finally made possible

by mastery of twentieth-century technics. In Mumford's usage in particular regionalism connoted a conservative counter-doctrine to modern bureaucracy, political centralism, and financial consolidation whether on the right or the left – a pathway through the middle ground of American society.

Thus the distinguishing mark of Mumford's regional utopia was the kind of cultural institutions it nourished, and chief among these was the museum or – to put it more accurately – *two* kinds of museums, those popular civic galleries created by sensibly scaled communities and the imperial museum spawned by the metropolis. An example of the former in his original utopian survey of 1922 is Johann Valentin Andreae's Christianopolis; of the latter, Francis Bacon's New Atlantis. Salomon's House, part museum stuffed with 'jewels and velvets and satins and ceremonial regalia', part national laboratory and university, presents a 'wild farrago of novel sounds, lights, tastes, and perfumes' to a Renaissance world enamored of exotica. Andreae's Christianopolis, a late medieval artisan democracy and garden city, boasts a civic museum which is a seeming precursor of Outlook Tower, complete with diagrams of the heavens, the story of mankind painted on its walls, and 'instruments of the mechanical arts drawn, named and explained' for visitors. To supplement their civic gallery the citizens of Christianopolis decorate their public buildings and landscape their communal spaces, turning the entire city into an extended museum tour. 'I cannot help expressing my admiration here', Mumford editorialised, 'for the concrete imagination of this remarkable scholar: he deliberately anticipated, not in the vague allegorical form that Bacon does, but as lucidly as an architect or a museum curator, the sort of institute which South Kensington, with its Departments of Physical and Natural Science, or perhaps the Smithsonian in America, has just begun to resemble.'¹⁷

Over the years Mumford's account of the rise of the modern metropolitan museum became more pointed and sharply critical than Geddes's original indictment. Historically, he wrote in *The Culture of Cities* (1937), his fullest exposition of the regional order of the future, the modern art museum derives from the baroque palace and country house where the gathered loot announced an 'ostentatious purchase' or advertised the fruits of military conquest. As for the museum of natural history it too bears the tell-tale marks of the trophy room of the Elizabethan sportsman who papered his walls with pelts and braces of antlers. The museum in both its guises and from earliest beginnings represented 'the very consummation of the acquisitive life': as throughout Europe the restless search for curiosities soon became a ritual and 'a primitive "collection economy" of the mind' flourished.

By the eighteenth century, in Mumford's private history of the museum, court aristocracies everywhere began to broaden the initial instinct for possession by showing the wonders of their collections to a larger public in a kind of curiosity parade which was the institutional counterpart of the shopping tour in town. And by the nineteenth century a new class of capitalists had established

COPING WITH THE PAST

hegemony so that now twentieth-century museum trustees, in their turn, are more concerned with the mechanics of acquisition than with their institution's teaching function, with the result that size has become the sole criterion of worth. Conceding that museums occasionally sought to teach the true uses of the past, Mumford nevertheless insisted that contemporary public interest could be explained chiefly in terms of the search for profits that characterised a pecuniary culture:

By the patronage of museums, the ruling metropolitan oligarchy of financiers and officeholders establish their own claims to culture: more than that, they fix their own standards of taste, morals, and learning as that of their civilisation – thus maintaining and stabilising the favored pattern of acquisitive living.

It matters not whether the municipality itself supplies the patronage since in any case the metropolitan museum tends to be judged by the size of its collections and the volume of its visitors. These latter, in a twentieth-century consumer world, are primarily culture-shoppers who 'tend to transform the chief institutions of learning into vast department stores of the arts and sciences, where everything is ticketed and labeled, where bargain attractions are offered, where the turnover of goods is more important than the ultimate satisfaction of the purchaser'.¹⁸

The ideal museum became clearer to Mumford as he measured the actual performance in a transitional age in terms of its custody of the past. The 'mission of the museum', as he phrased it, was to give people a way of 'coping with the past, of having significant intercourse with other periods and other modes of life, without confining [their] own activities to the molds created by the past'.¹⁹ Mumford's conception of the past was crucial to his analysis and criticism of the modern museum. The clues to an understanding of history, he argued repeatedly, lie in the relationships, connections, similarities and parallels among the dominant institutions of a given society. 'Each practical manifestation of a culture', he explained in *The Culture of Cities* (1937), 'tends to leave a shadow-self in the mind: this may be a result of the economic institution itself or it may issue out the same cultural complex that created it.' Megalopolis – a coinage he borrowed from Geddes to denote the burgeoning urban complex – leaves its spiritual but, equally important, its institutional imprint on the modern world in the form of huge industrial and financial cartels, mammoth universities mass producing students, and giant department stores and museums dispensing consumer goods and commercial culture. In similar fashion history discloses comparable connections in earlier civilisations – between the medieval cathedral and the civic procession, or between the country house in the Age of the Baroque and the zoological garden. In fact, Mumford argued, every historic period has both a *real* and a *realised* utopia – a two-way cultural mirror reflecting both the achievements and the aspirations of any given society. The historian searches a historical period for just this 'pure form' of its actual institutions 'which may therefore be abstracted from them and examined by itself'. To perform this excision is thus

‘to present the historical “world within” to supplement and enrich the conventional historian’s account of the ‘world-without’.²⁰ Precisely here lay the challenge to the modern museum.

For Mumford the twin barriers to meaningful historical recovery were antiquarianism and the monument. Both were denials of the very quality they were intended to celebrate – the autonomy of the past. Mumford frequently raised objections to such misuse of the past but never more forcefully than in a mid-1920s letter to a friend, Benton MacKaye, in denying that there could ever be real ‘revivals’ of anything.

What we look for, as an alternative to metropolitanism, is not a revival of the old: it is a fresh growth of something new, similar in animus and method, at times, to what has existed in the past, but with all the differences that the intervening time has wrought.²¹

The key to using the past creatively lay in a voluntary detachment from it, a disengagement from the historical context that ‘as far as works of art go ... may become complete’. Whereas museums of natural and social science, he now agreed, must necessarily ‘preserve and enshrine the background’, museums of art must ‘forego any such attempt’ since ‘the more complete the detachment and the more effectively we can screen a symbol from what it meant to another generation, the more swift and final is our own response’. The separation of the work of art from the circumstances of its creation also frees it from the danger of becoming a monument. A work of art is *not* a monument: ‘if it has a life at all, it exists as a contemporary fact: a fact in esthetics, a fact in religion, a fact in philosophy’. The properly functioning art museum presents these facts to its public and in so doing ‘serves to enlarge the circle of contemporary experience’ by sharpening its patrons’ awareness of the pastness of the past.²²

Mumford applied these standards rigorously in analysing and criticising American museums throughout a long career as architectural and cultural critic. He commended Alfred Stieglitz, for example, for showing the way to the effective use of limited space in his 291 and *An American Place* by ‘taking the floor of an office building, accepting its generous light, providing a clear neutral background in ... a gallery in which pictures could be seen in their real values and their true colors’.²³ He scolded the decorators of the old Whitney Museum on Eighth Street for their ‘fussy modernistic interpretation of old American’ in the spread-eagle wallpaper and elaborate lighting fixtures – Washington Square equivalents of the Williamsburg Inn which, aesthetically speaking, was ‘full of embalming fluid’.²⁴ When the new Museum of Modern Art opened in 1939, he noted in a highly appreciative review that there was nothing to the building to identify it specifically as a museum – ‘no classic columns or cornices: the place does not look like a temple or a palace’.²⁵

It was in his extensive review of the Cloisters in Fort Tryon Park in 1938 that Mumford’s concept of a usable past, his increasing concern with selectivity and scale, and his faith in a regional revival dramatically converged. In a ‘Sky Line’

piece for *The New Yorker* fittingly entitled 'Pax in Urbe' he builds slowly and solidly on impressions of the Cloisters not immediately favourable. For here is a 'southern European building' picked up and as if by magic whisked through the centuries and set on one of Fort Tryon Park's two hills to confront the George Washington Bridge much as Henry Adam's Virgin faces the Dynamo – 'not so much an honest relic as a wish'. The initial problem, Mumford notes ironically, is the Cloisters' fidelity to history which 'only accentuates one's feelings of being bewitched'. Where a pretentiously gothicised Riverside Church, cast in a single piece, 'is plainly a fake at any distance', the Cloisters is filled with 'authentic disharmonies' right down to the added Gothic chapel 'which looks as uncomfortably new in relation to the rest as such an addition might have looked in the thirteenth century'.

If the Cloisters is a replica, then, it is 'a genuine replica' and thus much closer to the true monument than anything else in America, except perhaps, Roland Wanks' TVA dams. Despite reservations about the literalism of Mediterranean round-tiled roofs and the overstated verticality of the tower – 'an archeological reminiscence rather than a natural evolution of museum as museum' – Mumford considered the Cloisters an overwhelming success. The main features of the museum, he pointed out, were not the individual works of art or pieces of statuary but the cloisters themselves, five of them plus a chapter house, some of them dismembered by successive seventeenth- and eighteenth-century revolutions and now reassembled. 'They constitute the main theme. The building itself is essentially a setting for the cloisters.' This 'least cluttered of museums' stands in its purity and simplicity as a rebuke to the commercial skyscrapers and highrises of downtown Manhattan, a reminder of the underlying kinship of the Romanesque and the modern. Aesthetic pleasure and historical memory alike are sharpened by the dramatic juxtaposition of past and present at the Cloisters – in 'swooping' yellow-and-green buses rolling up the curved driveways to park beside quiet gardens, in the overhead steel cables looped above the lavender-grey New London granite – all giving the 'necessary counterpoint' in time as well as space.

One doesn't have to be an adept in medieval symbolism to see in the Cloisters the extreme opposite, in position, in sense of life, in feeling of all that exists architecturally in the insolent towers at the other end of the island. The differences between faith and credit finance, between holy dying and profane living, is written there...²⁶

Here in 'the studied absence of the superfluous' at the Cloisters were assembled the essential ingredients of Mumford's regional revival as they combined in the lingering presence of the past as the 'shadow-self' of an organic culture of the Middle Ages, neither massive monument nor antiquarian relic but a 'fact' of the social gains and aesthetic completion possible in a scaled-down biotechnic order. Metropolitan museums, he argued in his extended discussion of regionalism in *The Culture of Cities*, like their city-settings, have become rubbish-heaps and dumping-grounds for all the cultural detritus that the me-

ropolis collects. 'The encyclopedic culture of the metropolis attempts to preserve everything and show everything; it mistakes acquisition for appreciation, a knowledge of names and incidents for aesthetic intuition, and mechanical imitation for cultural intercourse.'²⁷ In a biotechnic future which replaces the mechanical with the biological, museums will become carefully selective, a task made the easier by new technological allies, the phonograph and camera, both of which make the past more immediate and accessible and at the same time more 'historic' by 'narrowing the lapse of time between the actual events themselves and their concrete record'. Mumford was particularly intrigued by photography with its 'new kinetic compositions: the passage of objects, organisms, dream images through time and space' making a world of 'interpenetrating, counter-influencing' forms that help people experience that world with greater intensity and concreteness.

Technology thus empties out the museum and facilitates its transformation, like that of its parent metropolis, from cavernous warehouse to vital social centre. 'Is there a single metropolitan museum of art or natural history in the world that could not profit enormously from being decentralised, with each unit reduced to a modicum of its present size, and completely reorganised?'²⁸ What will the new regional museum look like, and how will it accomplish its renovative task? At this point in his prediction Mumford returns to the original utopian vision and regional model of his mentor, Patrick Geddes: the final three chapters of *The Culture of Cities*, some two hundred of the book's five hundred pages, is devoted to an account of the coming biotechnic utopia and its institutions and cultural habits. The region serves as the warp on which a future communal life will be woven. City and sustaining countryside, Mumford agrees with Geddes, will be inextricably bound together again as the city captures and transmits the 'universal forces' generated within the region. Genuine regional planning emanating from provincial civic galleries can at last be defined in normative terms as 'the effort to apply scientific knowledge and stable standards of judgment, justified by rational human values, to the exploitation of the earth'. Such a vast reclamation project will encompass communal recovery of the land through the principle of common ownership; wilderness and coastal management of wetlands; economic as well as ecological balance; decentralisation of industry; and the revitalising of artisanal culture. Mumford found an example of the naturally harmonious society in mid-nineteenth-century New England with its water-powered wooden mills, local mines and quarries, high pastures and trim-edged fields 'woven together by a ramifying system of canals and highroads' that connected outlying towns and villages to Boston, the true mother city.

Yet regional reformers, Mumford insisted, would have to improve on inherited prototypes, adapt them to more advanced technologies, and perfect new models resting on the principles of federalism and forming an international 'concentric regrouping' of people which would make the national state obsolescent. Paramount among these new institutions, he predicts, will be the revived regional museum growing out of 'a balanced regional culture, not out of an

acquisitive pattern of life'. Once free of the curse of possessive individualism, a new regional generation will finally come to control its relationship to the past in culturally renovated and ventilated museums. 'Each city would have its special museum of civic history, each community within the larger urban cluster would have its type of museum of natural history and human culture, portraying in compact and coherent form the actual environment: from the infinitely remote stars to the infinitesimal particles of protoplasm or energy: the place: the work: the people in all their ecological relations.' The regional museum, in fact, as Outlook Tower reborn.

A twentieth-century civilisation redeemed by regionalism, Mumford prophesied in the original spirit of his mentor, would make full and inventive use of flexible neotechnic materials to fashion a new architecture of economy characterised by an absence of the symbolic and the monumental. The monument will disappear in the poly-nucleated city of the future when a money economy has given way to a life economy, and the functionally designed civic gallery has replaced the church, the factory, and the museum as distinctive architectural forms. A world once encumbered to the point of immobility by its ponderous monuments will suddenly be released through regional revival to express itself in new forms of personality. 'The death of the monument has its counterpart in the disappearance of the uniform.' Life in the coming biotechnic order will be improved and extended through miraculous advances in medicine, hygiene, and public health finally possible in a fully socialised economy. Youth will be prolonged, the process of aging retarded, the 'span of senescence' increased. A new interest in personal health and concern for the body will create new forms for enjoyment of leisure: recreational parks and public beaches, city playgrounds and neighbourhood gymnasiums, ski trails and wilderness areas. Domesticity and child-rearing will soon become a 'bi-polar art' shared equally by both parents free for the first time to enjoy an unprecedented 'sexual efflorescence'.²⁹

Mumford's prediction of a coming Age of Aquarius was both a piece of popular cultural prophecy and a reformulation of Patrick Geddes's late nineteenth-century alternative culture. By the time Mumford completed his indictment of the modern museum and recommended its replacement, many of the specific innovations and reforms he called for were already being put in place. John Cotton Dana, the imaginative director of the Newark Museum, for example, had experimented with art loan services, workshops, citywide library extension, consumer education exhibits, museum schools, and had even proposed a change of title for his establishment from 'museum' to 'institute of visual instruction'. The two decades following the Second World War saw growing numbers of children's museums, technology fairs, store-front satellites, art-parks, sidewalk shows, film and jazz festivals, and artist-in-residence programs – all no doubt bearing Mumford's stamp of approval. What was missing in all this burst of popular culture was the original regionalist vision including the predicted demise of the metropolis and its offspring, the metropolitan museum, both of which continued to grow and flourish. The maturing of the welfare-warfare state,

the spreading of megalopolis down ugly metropolitan corridors, and the proliferation of huge urban monuments made it clear that all three had survived the regionalist challenge and were now prepared to last out the century. Mumford himself sourly acknowledged the inevitability if not the desirability of such survivals in 1959 by taking the readers of his 'Sky Line' column on a tour of Frank Lloyd Wright's new Guggenheim Museum, Breughel's Tower of Babel come to rest on New York's upper Fifth Avenue.

Like Geddes's handmade Outlook Tower, Wright's museum is designed to be experienced from the top down, but unlike the scaled civic gallery that opens to a panoramic urban view, the Guggenheim turns its back on New York as 'a monumental hall of exalted proportions that closes out the sky' and directs the viewer's attention inward to the great 'central void'. Viewers descend, not by worn stone staircases, but down a declining concrete ramp with sloping shelf along a curving wall which Mumford found both 'psychologically overpowering' and 'physiologically almost unbearable' as the abrupt fall of the ramp, he

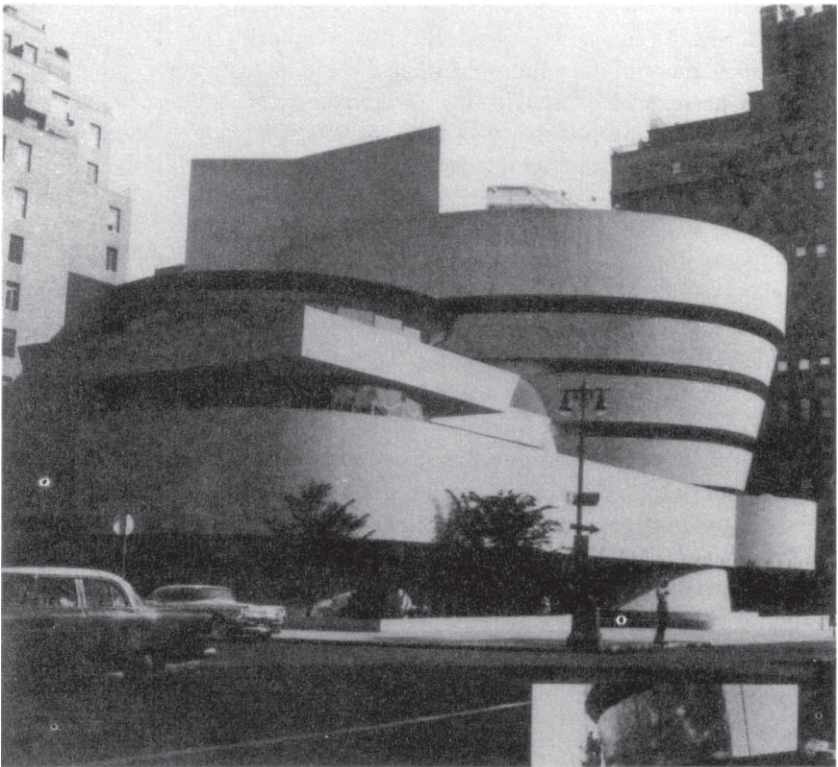


FIGURE 2. The Guggenheim Museum, New York

complained, ‘adds to the muscular tensions created by the form of the structure and its dizzying impact on the eye’. The effect is that of a monumental piece of sculpture ‘whose dynamic flow is accentuated by the silhouettes of the spectators, who form a moving frieze against the intermittent spots of painting on the walls’. The paintings themselves are stretched, chopped off, elongated, and cut down to fit into Wright’s Procrustean bed of a museum. For architecture, Mumford intones, is not sculpture, and the Guggenheim is not a museum but a monument – its outside a celebration of the idea of sheer power, and the inside a testament to the architect’s colossal ego. ‘Short of insisting that no pictures at all be shown, Wright could not have gone further to create a structure sublime in its own right but ridiculous as a museum of art... There is not a mistake in rigidity of plan, in scale, or in setting made by the pompous academic temple museums of the past that Wright did not reproduce or actually cap.’ The Guggenheim Museum symbolised for Mumford the siege-mentality entirely appropriate to a nuclear age – the raw power ‘to defy blast, to resist change, to remain as immune to time as the Pyramids’.³⁰

In a final lecture in the series he gave at the New School in the summer of 1923 and then published as *Talks From the Outlook Tower* Patrick Geddes described the ‘vital beginnings’ to be made in discovering a moral substitute for war ‘by returning to the working world in its healthiest and sanest, and thus most truly useful forms’ in the regional civic gallery and thus escaping once and for all ‘the long spiritual desolation, and despotism, of the utilitarian economy’, revolving endlessly and mechanically around the price system and the cash-register. Nearly forty years later at the end of his long descent of the walls of Wright’s Guggenheim Museum, Mumford quoted the architect’s boast that when a nuclear bomb destroyed the rest of the city, his building, sitting on its cushioned foundation like an inverted ziggurat, would merely bounce with the shock, settle, and survive. Mumford, contemplating the connected fates of museum, metropolis, and megamachine should the unthinkable actually happen, was moved to add his own postscript. In that event, he noted, Wright would be left surveying the ruins of the city and his own triumph over it, ‘an empty monument’ in ‘an untenanted world’.

NOTES

¹ Patrick Geddes, *City Development: A Study of Parks, Gardens, and Culture-Institutes: A Report to the Carnegie Dunfermline Trust* (Edinburgh: Patrick Geddes and Colleagues, 1904), p. 131, as quoted in Marshall Stalley (ed.), *Patrick Geddes: Spokesman for Man and the Environment, A Selection* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1972), ‘Biography of Patrick Geddes by Abbie Ziffren’, p. 57.

² For accounts of Geddes’s life, from which this sketch is drawn, see Philip L. Boardman, *Patrick Geddes: Maker of the Future* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1944); Philip Mairet, *Pioneer of Sociology: The Life and Letters of Patrick Geddes*

(London: Lund Humphries, 1957).

³ Patrick Geddes, *Talks from the Outlook Tower*, reprinted in Stalley, *Geddes*, pp. 294-380, 'The Fourth Talk: The Valley in Town', p. 338.

⁴ Geddes's indictment of the traditional museum and his description of the civic gallery appear in *Cities in Evolution*, Chapter XII, 'Town Planning and Civic Exhibitions', and Chapter XVII, 'The Spirit of Cities', excerpted in Stalley, pp. 222-241, 267-271.

⁵ For Geddes's description and analysis of the valley section see 'The Third Talk: The Valley Plan of Civilization', in *Talks from the Outlook Tower*, Stalley, pp. 321-333.

⁶ *Cities in Evolution*, in Stalley, 232.

⁷ *Ibid.*, in Stalley, 235.

⁸ *Ibid.*, in Stalley, 269.

⁹ *Ibid.*, in Stalley, 270.

¹⁰ For an account of an imaginary tour of Outlook Tower, from which this abbreviated version is drawn, see Boardman, *Geddes*, Chapter 9, 'The Burglar of the Outlook Tower', pp. 166-196. Geddes's explanation of the valley section appears in 'The Third Talk: The Valley Plan of Civilization', *Talks*, in Stalley, p. 325.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, in Stalley, p. 327.

¹² Lewis Mumford, *Sketches from Life: An Autobiography of Lewis Mumford: The Early Years* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982), p. 149.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

¹⁵ Lewis Mumford, 'The Marriage of Museums', *The Scientific Monthly*, September, 1918, reprinted in Lewis Mumford, *Findings and Keepings: Analects for an Autobiography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975) pp. 29-36.

¹⁶ Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias*, Compass ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), pp. 263-264.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁸ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, Harvest ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), pp. 263-264.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 446-448.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 262; 'Random Note', March 29, 1922, *Findings and Keepings*, pp. 74-75.

²¹ Lewis Mumford to Benton MacKaye, July 25, 1927, MacKaye Papers, Baker Library, Dartmouth College.

²² *Culture of Cities*, p. 447.

²³ 'On Making a Museum', 'The Sky Line', *The New Yorker*, June 25, 1932, pp. 50-51.

²⁴ *Idem.*

²⁵ 'The New Museum', 'The Sky Line', *The New Yorker*, June 3, 1939.

²⁶ 'Pax in Urbe', 'The Sky Line', *The New Yorker*, May 21, 1938, pp. 60-62.

²⁷ *Culture of Cities*, p. 447.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

²⁹ Mumford outlines his biotechnic utopia in Chapter VII, 'Social Basis of the New Urban Order', in *Culture of Cities*.

³⁰ 'What Wright Hath Wrought', 'The Sky Line', *The New Yorker*, December 5, 1959.