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## A Conversation with Nader Vossoughian and Arno van Roosmalen

Back to the Polis: Neurath and Participatory Knowledge Systems

As a forerunner of Wikipedia or Open Source systems, Otto Neurath pioneered in information technology vanguardism. During the early 20th century, he was a social engineer of happiness who advocated interactive knowledge exchange as a spontaneous way of planning the metropolis. In the 'After Neurath' seminar program Stroom explored the relevance of Neurath's social project for today's urban context in The Hague and worldwide. Connoisseur Nader Vossoughian's 'The Global Polis' show is a purposeful attempt to re-introduce Neurath's language and ideas into the public debate on contemporary urbanism. Volume visited the exhibition and spoke with its curator and the director of Stroom.

Arjen Oosterman: Perhaps you can explain why we are here?

Nader Vossoughian: You raise an interesting question: why are we here? I live in New York, and we're in The Hague. One reason we're here is that there are a number of curatorial affinities between what Volume is seeking to do, what Stroom is doing, and some of the issues in which I've been interested. These include issues of communication, media and the relationship between various institutional bodies as they exist today. Volume is a publication that involves an architecture practice, an architectural school and a periodical. Similarly, Stroom is an institution that is both a venue for showing, sharing and talking about art, architecture politics, as well as a place that has a real significant presence throughout The Hague. One of the exciting things I've experienced in my short contact with Stroom is the extent to which it's really committed to treating The Hague as kind of a laboratory for studying a range of contemporary cultural issues. I have had the opportunity to come contact with different artists, as well as planners and architects.

How does this exhibition explore boundaries? Otto Neurath's (1882-1945) prime conceit was that the modern museum could be copied just like the Ford Model-T. He made the unbelievably radical claim that the
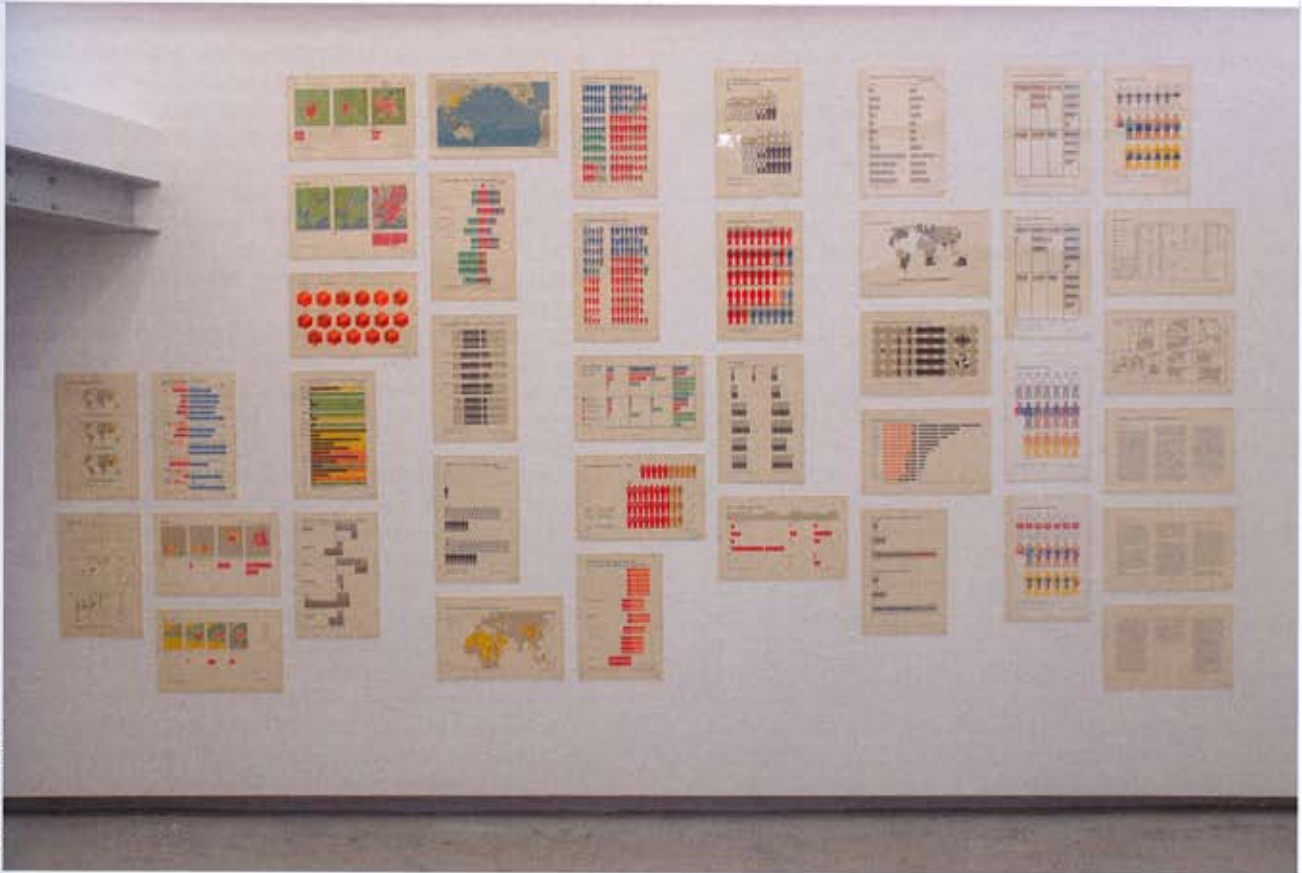
only thing that was valuable to collect were things you could reproduce. A major issue we wanted to explore in the show is what we thought about that conceit, what we think about the idea of a 'museum without borders'. Neurath felt that mass-producing the museum was good because it made the institution more accessible to the masses. We, on the other hand, felt that it was both positive and negative: while the mass media allowed Neurath to reach ever-wider audiences, it also rendered increasingly passive and mute the very audiences that Neurath sought to reach.

Christian Ernsten: Neurath wanted to produce a museum that could be copied. Is that a characteristic of your exhibition as well? And did that change Stroom as an institute?

NV: How have we effected Stroom? I'm not really sure. Perhaps time will tell. Certainly, as Arno has pointed out, the 'After Neurath' project has had a significant impact on Stroom's curatorial direction, particularly inasmuch as it insists upon the multi-disciplinary analysis of urban form.

Stroom, I should add, has been an inspiring place for me. It is not quite a museum and not quite a library. Nor is it a gallery. Thus, what is most exciting about it is that it's not really clear what it is. It's really trying to test what culture is, what cultural institutions are, and what a democratic institution or a kind of transparent institution could mean today. Such questions are particularly urgent, I think, given the way in which communications technologies are increasingly eroding – and in some ways redefining – the boundaries separating the public

from the private sphere, and facts from artifacts. There is no such thing as a 'pure' museum anymore.

AO: You expressed interest in the structure Neurath proposed, his structural vision of culture and his attempt to develop instruments to help further that vision. How does his vision of culture relate to contemporary society? Is it the logical continuation of an evolution? Or is it a radically different theme?

NV: Are you asking if we live in a different reality?

AO: Maybe. Is this the reality he was hoping for or were his assumptions radically different?

Arno van Roosmalen: In the previous part of the program, we talked a lot about who Neurath would be had he lived now. People mostly came up with the guys who developed Wikipedia or Bill Gates, those who are involved with the mass distribution, opening up and sharing of information. Compare how Neurath saw an ISOTYPE – if a symbol had more than two levels to enter then he didn't consider it an icon. It should be superficial. Were he to have lived now, he would probably have supported the internet and he might even have thought, 'ok, it's superficial information or basically a superficial way of exchanging information.' On the other hand, I can hardly imagine he would be content with that situation; I always thought that ISOTYPE and the way he structured information was a starting point for introducing people to a subject for him.

AO: Neurath lived at a time when mass communication, mass production, etc. was industrialized and he accepted this new reality. Nowadays, it's

no longer the question of how to deal with the masses, the masses seem equal to culture. In that sense, there's a big shift in cultural reality.

NV: I'm not exactly sure what you mean by the masses equaling culture, but I do think that you might actually be overstating the extent to which Neurath's reality differs from our own. His technological tools were different – he didn't have the internet – but the issues he dealt with were the same. Can technology foster inclusivity and democratic participation? How can we broaden the public sphere by improving access to knowledge and information? These sound like twenty-first century questions, but they were already central to the thoughts of people like Neurath over eighty years ago.

I should say, moreover, that there are probably at least two Neuraths. There's the Neurath of the 1930s who deeply identified with modern mass media, which I interpret as the cynical Neurath, the Neurath for whom technology became a substitute for people. And then there's the Neurath of the 1920s who was very much interested not just in technology, but also in participatory forms of governance. That is a more fruitful model for the present, I think. Why? Because during that period he insisted on utilizing a combination of top-down and bottom-up planning strategies in order to effect change in the city. Neurath wanted to plan 'ordered disorder' in the modern metropolis. Early on, he used the language of mass advertising in order to promote the project of social and political Enlightenment. He also devised strategies of visual communication that practically anyone could learn. When Neurath first developed the International System Of TYpographic Picture Education or ISOTYPE, one of the important points he made was that graphic charts be designed in a way that people could easily imitate or copy. He liked the idea of making statistical charts using mounted cut-outs because they could be put together using paper and scissors. Not everyone could draw, but most people knew how to cut and paste.

As a housing administrator during the early 1920s, moreover, Neurath supported the industrialization of the building industry (a top-down measure). He did so, however, only inasmuch as it furthered the city's co-operative and self-help building initiatives (a bottom-up development). After World War I, hunger, unemployment and homelessness were rampant in the city, and people were squatting in and around Vienna's Wald- und Wiesengürtel. Neurath supported what the squatters and self-help settlers were doing, despite the fact that they flouted zoning codes and property laws, because they illustrated for him a way in which citizens could become planners. He liked the fact that people were appropriating the urban fabric in resourceful and creative ways, building barter communities and make-shift homes, but he wanted to develop a planning infrastructure that helped coordinate and bring a measure of order to what was already happening. This emphasis on 'planned spontaneity' was very positive, I think – it represented a vision for planning that we could learn a lot from today – but was lost sight of somewhat during the 1930s.

CE: How did you introduce this participatory element into the show?

AvR: In Stroom we now use Neurath as a reference in terms of policy. For instance, we use his notion of the museum for the dissemination of information. On the other hand, I'm not naive – although the city government would want it – the people will never enter this building, and I would never aim for them to do so. This space is a home base and functions more or less like a laboratory. So what we do is develop, criticize, analyze or put forward ideas. This is also being realized in other programs in the city. I envision in five or ten years time that Stroom will have shifted as an institution outside the realm of arts towards something like a center of expertise. This notion is a better starting point for thinking about how we relate to Neurath. The basic aim of Stroom is to bring what is created here to those segments of society – which is not the people or the society – that are its building segments and to use representatives to translate this to broader groups of people. I think very much in terms of language and I don't think the language we use here is useful for the masses, if one can still speak of the masses. I see Stroom in the future far more as an intermediary than as a presentation place. It's a gradual process. I don't believe Neurath's saying you can copy any museum and disseminate any information to the masses. I don't think that's true and the internet is proof that it's not. The way that democracy functions now is more proof. Yet we do try to involve ourselves in developing processes in the city and try to take a position which is maybe not literally Neurath's but is still informed by him. How can we involve people in the planning process and fill in the gap of top-down or bottom-up planning? How can we define the cultural component of informal planning?

NV: People always equate Neurath with these cute little pictograms. What Arno is underscoring is a certain vision of planning, of culture. In the show and in the book, the ISOTYPE charts represent one tool for engaging the public sphere. I totally agree with Arno that this is not about recycling Neurath's strategies or ideas per se. What it is about is trying to stimulate a dialogue concerning certain issues he helped frame.

AO: Did Neurath fail?

NV: In his own time Neurath did fail. Contrary to his efforts, fascism won and in the Soviet Union Stalin used his methods to promote his second Five-Year Plan. That's not to say that Neurath isn't useful or relevant. In fact, he may have been incredibly untimely. I think there are aspects of his project which are incredibly fertile for urban planning discussions today.

The functional city, as envisioned by Le Corbusier, was basically defined by recreation, work, housing and transportation. It was not about knowledge and information sharing, and that's one of the important things about Neurath. He grasped that the city is not just a space of flows and movement, it's not just about getting from A to B to C as quickly as possible. It's also a place for sharing knowledge. Neurath developed an infrastructure for disseminating and decentralizing access to knowledge. In Vienna, he built a network of museums that sought to improve access to information and he attempted to make the city function in a more interactive and transparent way.

CE: Let's go see the exhibition.

AvR: To exemplify the participatory aspect of the show there is material people can take away and the show is mediated through projection at night. The opening times of Neurath's museum were such that laborers could attend the exhibition after working hours.

NV: The fact that Neurath's Museum of Society and Economy was open at night was revolutionary, as artificial lighting was completely new to museums during the 1920s. On the one hand, the Museum of Science and Economy attempted to democratize the museum in space by having exhibits in Vienna's city hall, as well as in storefronts and satellite locations. But it also democratized the museum in time through the use of artificial lighting (you could visit the museum after work).

One of the tensions that the exhibition designers, Project Projects, and I really wanted to cultivate was between originals and copies. In many respects, Neurath would have hated this show because we include original works. We thought it was important to do so because we wanted to emphasize the importance of both site-specificity and mass dissemination.

The show is structured in three acts. The first act, 'The Communal City', focuses on Neurath in the settlement movement and then Neurath in the Museum of Science and Economy. The second act, 'The World City', is very much inspired by Neurath's engagement with mass forms of communication.

Here on the wall you can see Gesellschaft und Wirtschaft [Society and Economy, 1930] which was a portfolio publication that doubled as a traveling exhibit. The whole show was contained in a box. The first time it was unfolded was in the 'Am Fuchsenfeld' Gemeindebau, a social housing complex in Vienna. Other media with which Neurath experimented in this phase were brochures, books, posters, and then in the 1940s he started to do animation films. There's an example of this downstairs.

The third act is entitled 'The Functional City'. It examines Neurath's engagement with urban planning. In 1931, Cornelis van Eesteren wanted to derive a universal language of urban planning along the lines of Neurath's ISOTYPE and that affinity brought them together. Neurath's ideas were adopted specifically for CIAM's 'Functional City' congress which took place in Athens in 1933.

Cornelis van Eesteren thought cities should be planned by planners, whereas for Neurath what was most important was the idea of transparency, that the language of urban planning be accessible to the common person. So some of the charts he made looked kind of child-like, but that was done intentionally because he wanted the principles of functionalist urbanism to reach a broader audience.

AvR: I'm looking at this poster Wonen Werken Verkeer Ontspanning – the four functions – and I remember the OMA master plan for the Binckhorst (in The Hague, the Netherlands), the way it's being published, it's literally those words, maybe slightly different.

NV: The problem of seeing the city in terms of these four functions is that it basically divorces social from physical life. The idea of the polis was that the two

would be connected. Those political and social systems were actually connected to the physical fabric. It is said that the polis only consisted of free men, which is valid, but others might say it sounds like a very Western idea about the city. The truth is that the ancient Greeks did not invent the polis. The first poleis are actually from ancient Mesopotamia, and in that sense they have a history that transcends the European context. The idea that the city could be a political and a social entity is a compelling one, and we need to develop research tools to investigate those different layers.

In that sense, this show is a return to the primal scene: from global polis to early polis as a way of thinking about the future polis, looking at an early debate to help shape a future dialogue.

ISOTYPE, which literally translates as 'shaped alike,' is an acronym for 'International System of TYpographic Picture Education.' It was a term Otto Neurath adopted during the mid-1930s to replace the more parochial-sounding 'Vienna Method of Pictorial Statistics.'
ISOTYPE makes scientific and social facts more accessible to non-specialized audiences worldwide. It merges science and everyday life through the use of pictorial signs and symbols.