

Of Tennis Courts and Fireplaces: Neurath's Internment on the Isle of Man and his Politics of Design

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Michelle Henning

This talk is based in archival research in Otto Neurath's correspondence and papers, and secondary and primary reading on the Isle of Man, and on wartime internment policy. It is also based in my own brief research at the Manx Museum in Douglas, my visit to the site of the Onchan internment camp and discussion with friends and relatives of internees in nearby camps. My argument, however is speculative and heuristic, and should be taken in that spirit. In this paper I am interested in teasing out connections, and in working with unresolved loose ends from my research, to address the connections between Neurath's ideas about interior design, furnishing and architecture or everyday objects (chairs, fireplaces, tennis courts, and shoes), with his lived experience of internment and in the context of 1940s Britain.

Neurath's politics of design had already been developed in Red Vienna, through his work in relation to housing and settlement in the early 1920s. He shared his ideas about the problems of functionalism in design, and about the social importance of design, with his friend the architect Josef Frank. Neurath recognised the importance of everyday household objects in making possible certain ways of living, a tolerable and viable way of life. Despite this, he was a strong critic of the ideas of shaping a way of life that were held by some modernist designers (for example in the Bauhaus) and concepts of function and causality these implied. In Britain, he also emphatically rejected the idea of social "experiments" - as used to describe the Peckham experiment (1926-1950) because of the way they took people's lives as mere objects for study and testing.

I want to begin by giving you some impression of what Neurath's internment on the Isle of Man was like. Second World War Internment on the Isle of Man really began in late

1939 / early 1940, after the holiday trade on the Isle of Man had been severely affected by the War. The Isle of Man, as you may know, is not part of the United Kingdom but is classed as a “self-governing British Crown dependency”. Before the war, tourism was the main industry of the Isle of Man, with the large Victorian terraced houses being a source of income through the bed and breakfast trade. In 1939-40, as this tourism dried up, the Manx Chamber of Trade suggested the Island as a site for Internment camps (as it had been in WWI). However, this time, the home secretary decided not to build camps in the countryside but to requisition the Victorian boarding houses – which was not exactly what the Manx landladies had had in mind.

When Otto Neurath and Marie Reidemeister arrived in England on 15th May 1940, Churchill had just become prime minister, and paranoia about spies and "fifth columnists" was at its height. The numbers of refugees arriving from Europe each day was increasing. The internment programme expanded to take in men and women who had lived in Britain for years, together with the newly arrived refugees from Europe, most of whom were Jewish.¹ On May 15th the Dutch refugees from the *Zeemanshoop*, the boat on which Otto and Marie had escaped, were not interned, but German and Austrian men and women were separated and the men taken to Pentonville, the women to Holloway. From Pentonville, Neurath was moved to a makeshift camp at Kempton Park Racecourse. There the internees were housed in the racecourse buildings, in stables, and in tents. They slept on mattresses on stone floors, up to a hundred men to a room, and then, nearly a month after his arrival in England, Neurath was shipped to Onchan camp, in the north of Douglas bay on the Isle of Man.

Around 1200 -1300 German-speaking men were interned in Onchan camp between June 1940 and July 1941 in between 56 to 60 requisitioned houses (500 bedrooms), 2 or 3 men to a bedroom.² Onchan camp was less overcrowded than other camps on the island. The houses were large, many with nine bedrooms or more. Connery Chappell's history of the Isle of Man internment camps in World War two, *Island of Barbed Wire*, says that the size of the houses, the beautiful sea views from the headland and the presence of football pitches and tennis courts meant that “Onchan Camp could reasonably have been regarded as the ‘best’ male internment camp on the island.”³ Local residents generally had no contact with the interned men but would see them accompanied by soldiers, going down to the sea, to go swimming. The camp included recreation facilities because

a social club or holiday camp was a part of the requisitioned area.⁴ At first there was a ban on communications but later radios were allowed and the men produced their own newspaper – the *Onchan Pioneer*. A Popular University was founded and between May 1940 and February 1941, four hundred and ninety-six lectures were held.

I do not want to give the impression that the men did not suffer. In the beginning, Nazi sympathisers were sometimes housed with Jews, and the internees had no access to news and communications. Some would have arrived without full identification papers, and could be using false names. Neurath, to my knowledge, did not commit much description of the camp to writing. From other refugee accounts, we know that the emotional impact of internment was very varied. For some prisoners it was traumatic, particularly for those who had already experienced the Nazi concentration camps. It was impossible to know who to trust, and for Jews and known opponents of Nazism there was another danger: in 1940, no-one could know the outcome of the war. Should Germany take Britain, the captives on the Isle of Man would have no escape. They felt that they were effectively “sitting ducks”. Moreover, winter was brutally cold on the Isle of Man, with only Victorian fireplaces for heating.

So while, as I say, I do not want to underplay the suffering, I do want to lay the ground for thinking about the environment Neurath found himself in and in which he gave a lecture on sociology: according to *The Onchan Pioneer* his lecture held the record of the highest attendance for an indoor lecture. Two hundred and fifty men came to hear him give a talk cryptically titled ““How do you make the tennis court so durable?”. It is unclear to me whether the lecture was given in English or German, and whether any record of it still exists – I have not found one. But let us assume “How do you make the Tennis Court so durable” is a translation. The literal meaning of this in English is why is the Tennis court hard? This is not quite such a peculiar question as it sounds: Tennis courts can be grass courts or tarmacked, and the Tennis court in Onchan camp is tarmacked, that is a hard court. Tarmacked courts ARE more durable than soft grass courts.

But it is possible that Neurath meant “enduring” rather than durable - which has a subtly different meaning. If we ask the question "how do you make the tennis court endure?" we suddenly seem to be on more familiar Neurath territory and we can begin to imagine

a possible lecture. Why, for instance, keep a tennis court in a prison? How to keep playing in such a situation? What is the importance of play, of pleasure?⁵ What if the question about the tennis court is actually about how to preserve joy, against the odds?

Play mattered for Neurath. Above all, he valued human happiness and in his writings had frequently suggested that it ought to be the basis and the starting point for planning (town planning, and social and economic planning more broadly). Perhaps the tennis court played a similar role as the “English fireplace” did in Neurath’s thought. The latter comes up several times in Neurath’s notes and effects after internment. On 9 November 1941 Neurath gave a lecture at Bedford College Cambridge on logical empiricism, in which the English fireplace is mentioned.⁶ It comes up again in his 1942 essay “International Planning for Freedom”. It also appears in notes for a talk not by Neurath but by Henry N. Winter titled “The Englishman Abroad” which is among Neurath’s papers in the Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype Collection at the University of Reading.

In these writings the fireplace example serves a dual purpose. First, it seems to represent the importance of pleasure and human happiness as against the tendency of social planners and designers to emphasize efficiency and function. For example, in the Cambridge lecture, he contrasts the German use of the fire as “a tool for making warm” with the effect of the English fireplace “centralising, grouping people... giving an opportunity to be together”. Grouping and gathering around the fire had been a necessity in the Onchan camp - in the Manx museum in Douglas, one painting, made by an internee shows large groups of Internees around the fireplace during the bitter winter nights. The museum also includes a Manx fireplace, which, in the traditional Isle of Man cottages would typically take up an entire wall and incorporated seating and ovens. But the fireplaces of the Onchan boarding houses are more conventionally Victorian in design – the same as in my own Victorian house in Bristol. Larger houses would have had fireplaces in bedrooms, the smaller ones may have had them only in the main living room: in any case, availability of coal may have limited fires to the main room which forced men to sit together around the fire.

In his 1941 lecture, Neurath made the point that, if to German and Austrian eyes, the English fireplace is a waste of calories, we might say the same about skiing. His discussion of the fireplace is a riposte to those functionalists in design who have a limited

notion of function. This point, about the function of the fireplace being more than simply “making warm” comes up again in “International Planning for Freedom”, where he makes the point that fireplaces are not “happiness neutral” in the way that the cable shaft beneath the street might be.

The second purpose of the fireplace example is as a means for Neurath to distance himself from any straightforward idea that design can produce or cause, certain forms of sociability. We should be wary of assuming that Neurath saw it as contributing to an English immunity to Nazi or Fascist government, although at times in his writing he seems to be implying this (as I will discuss further on, he does connect design to national and cultural differences). Design carries a great responsibility but its consequences cannot be determined in advance: as he says in the Cambridge lecture, “changing the fireplace institution means changing many things; we cannot say what. It is very difficult for sociologist to find out what things are related with that.”

Neurath’s 1942 “International Planning for Freedom” essay is an explicit call for social planning – for the need to “consciously cultivate the future and the possible”.⁷ But the fireplace serves as a warning about how nuanced and complex this is, as well as a reminder of how pleasure as well as efficiency must take a central role. What makes people happy is very hard to anticipate since “All homely comfort relate to certain traditional customs and environments and that joy sometimes might depend solely on the fact that something should not be changed... How much ‘discomfort’ is liked because it is ‘ours’. And yet other people like change and adventure”.⁸ Therefore planning “must pay equal heed to the psychological qualities of men, to their love of novelty, their ambition, attachment to tradition... as does the engineer to the elasticity of iron, to the breaking point of copper...”

Neurath’s principal opportunity to put this in to action in England was in his involvement with the redevelopment of the town of Bilston near Wolverhampton, in the West Midlands. This work was fraught with local political difficulties and that it proved extremely stressful for Neurath is evident from his letters. I think the stress was to do with the gap between what he was touted as doing – “bringing happiness to Bilston” and the limited room for manoeuvre or influence that he had been given. Neurath died before his work in Bilston was complete, but from his letters we can see that he was

trying to put his idea of a nuanced approach to planning into practice – as he wrote “I am looking at all these items from a personal point of view, how a single person in your society may look at it, as a father, as a tired person, as a person who would like to read a book.”

In beginning with where people are, what they actually do and enjoy (instead of where they ideally “ought to be”) Neurath was distancing himself from a certain tradition in German and British thought, which associated planning with moral reform. He was also being remarkably consistent with one of his earliest writings – “The Converse Taylor System” of 1917, where he argues for an approach to social planning that does not impose structures from above but builds upwards, from the diversity of people “as we find them”.⁹

Of the three mentions of the English fireplace I cited above, the third is in a talk given by Henry N. Winter¹⁰. In early January 1944 Winter had sent a copy of his notes to Neurath, at Neurath’s request. Winter referred to his talk as being on his “impressions of Germany” and “the riddle of the German character” – although the paper he enclosed was titled “Notes for a Talk: The Englishman Abroad”. The talk was divided into headings: “the Englishman”; “The foreigner”; “Home Life” and “Position of Women” and proceeded to characterise both English and Germans with sharp stereotypes.

Neurath’s letter in return thanked Winter very politely but also provided some gentle criticism: he emphasized his own ability to see Germans from the outside since he is Austrian, not German; he emphasized the need not to proceed simply from anecdote, or observation of the “puzzling multiplicity of German behaviour” but from proof. Neurath seems to have been busy looking for such proof, trying to find out why the German cultural environment might lend itself to militarism, propaganda, and a culture of obedience. For Neurath as for Winter, fireplaces are linked to differences in national tendencies and through that to the diagnosis of the culture, physical environment and even “intellectual and emotional environment” in which Nazism had taken root.¹¹

Neurath repeatedly characterised Englishness in terms of “muddle” (one talk he gave in this period was entitled “Toleration, Muddle and Victory”, and several times he described life in Oxford as “our English muddle”. Again a little clarifying of terms will be

helpful: muddle is frustrating, disorganised confusion but we also have the English expression, “muddling along” or “muddling through” which means to get by, to make do. It is associated with “botching”, with the fix that is just good enough, and with making it up as you go along. The wartime meaning of muddle was distinctive, and differed from earlier meanings, or the meanings it accrued in other variants of English (such as American English). In one nineteenth-century American publication, Richard Soule’s 1871 *Dictionary of English Synonyms*, muddle is defined primarily in relation to drunkenness and wastefulness: to “stupefy, fuddle, inebriate” and to “muddle away” was to “waste, misuse, squander”.¹² But in 1930s and ’40s Britain, one could, quite successfully and tolerably, muddle along through life; muddling along is the opposite to grand ambitions, dreams of ideal society, or organised planning.¹³ In this period, it also had a specific meaning linked to British identity and politics, which was to do with the absence of ideology, of policy and of economic planning, something understood as a positive national characteristic, almost a virtue, at times. The term was used in both British and American contexts to characterise wartime Britain.¹⁴

Given his lifelong commitment to social planning, Neurath’s feelings on this score seem to have been understandably to be quite mixed. On the one hand he recognised in “muddle” a quality that might be necessary for preventing any kind of cultural hospitality toward Nazism, on the other hand he wanted to see botching and making do as merely a rational response to imperfect design, and therefore something that can be designed – or planned – out.

I gave an example of this in an essay I wrote some years ago about Neurath’s visit to Bilston.¹⁵ The town clerk of Bilston, A.V. Williams wrote that the town councillors were worried that slum-dwellers moved into new modern houses would simply turn those houses into slums by putting coal in the bath. Against this, Neurath “stressed most emphatically that people only put coals in the bathtub for some very good reason” such as inadequate fuel storage places, or expensive hot water systems. He went on to mention that he knew a man in Vienna who kept a pig in his bath. Putting coal (or pigs) in the bath is a way of muddling along, that demonstrates (rather than undermines) Neurath’s faith in human ingenuity, rationality and creativity. However, with a proper heating system or fuel storage, Neurath imagined that the muddle, or botch, would no longer be necessary.

Even so, Neurath's sensitivity to human feeling and the tendency to love what is not necessarily efficient or functional, is much greater than that of most commentators of the period. Neurath did not specify which of his German friends had been so damning about the wasteful English fireplace. But we can look at commentary from the period to see the fireplace is under fire – so to speak. William Gaunt, for example, writing in the *Journal of the Royal Society of the Arts* in 1934, argued “we no longer have any need for a huge black cave in the room in which a fire burns” and “round which a shivering family crouch” on the grounds that the wireless now provided an alternate focus (similar arguments have been made about the television).¹⁶ In 1942, in the same journal, R. Fitzmaurice, anticipating the postwar rebuilding of Britain emphasized that the key factors in the design of heating systems were the economy and efficiency of fuel but that this was blocked in Britain by “a violent prejudice” in favour of the “open domestic grate”.¹⁷ In other words, Neurath's example of the fire was not simply plucked from the air or even from experience, but out of a recognition that heating systems were a key part of the debates surrounding postwar planning.

Neurath's concern with everyday objects was consistent with the 1920s *neue Sachlichkeit* interest in the everyday object world and consistent too with the attention to the mundane aspects of British life that is found in the work of Mass Observation in the 1930s and the statistical, survey based work of organisations like Le Play House (Neurath was familiar with the work of both). For him, these objects play three roles: they become a means of exploring and exemplifying the task of sociology and social theory, and what logical empiricism is capable of; they are his means for continuing to debate the nature of functionalism in design, debates begun in the 1920s in his interaction with the Bauhaus and with modern architecture in Austria and Germany; and thirdly, they are the material of Isotype charts – the material stuff out of which data can be produced, ways of life described and analysed. Through Isotype and in his writings and lectures, Neurath began to plot a correlation between the design and uses of everyday objects and forms of sociability, as part of his attempt to arrive at a more complex, pluralist functionalism – understood from the ground up, that is, from the empirical basis of everyday experience.

At the start of this talk I mentioned, alongside tennis courts and fireplaces, the example of chairs. Tennis courts and fireplaces endure: the tennis courts because of the necessity

for play even in the most constrained circumstances, and fireplaces because of British obstinacy, and the inadequacy of efficiency calculations (or calorie counting). Yet chairs are amongst the objects most easily and frequently reinvented in Modernism. The centrality of the chair in modernist design is remarkable and linked to the fact that chairs are most evidently a means to shape people by positioning their bodies¹⁸. Chairs are anthropomorphic: literally taking on the shape of people, but also becoming person-like. In the 1935 essay “Art as Experience” the Bauhaus teacher Josef Albers wrote “We should try to see a chair as a living creature... as an apparatus willing to hold us, to carry, to surround or embrace us.”¹⁹ Adolf Loos, another Viennese observer of English muddle noted “following the principle that every type of tiredness requires a different chair, an English room is never furnished with one type of seat alone”.²⁰ Loos neglected the fact that being tired is not the only precondition for sitting. In England at least, fireplaces and chairs were intimately connected – you pull up a chair to the fireside.

Neurath decorated one letter to a friend with a little cartoon captioned “The higher the seat, the lower the salary”. This wry joke points to another aspect of British seating arrangements that Loos overlooked: their function in maintaining forms of social distinction. Changing the seating arrangements, moving the chairs around, may be easier and more predictable in its impact than changing something as durable as the fireplace but as with fireplaces, chairs have functions that go beyond the purely symbolic. They facilitate interaction, they allow for certain kinds of discussion and they shape social behaviour. In Neurath's view, to understand how they do this would be a task for a careful and nuanced empirical sociology.

I want to mention one final object: shoes – which are not, of course, furnishings or elements of architecture, but which have in common with chairs and fireplaces the ability to shape ways of being in the world – how we stand, run, walk. How might one begin to analyse shoes, in social and cultural terms? Neurath offers plenty of suggestions in a letter to the British photographer John Hinde in 1944. He is proposing to Hinde a possible topic for an Isotype chart. Hinde was working on a book project with Neurath, though during the war he mostly employed doing highly staged, well crafted, wartime propaganda photographs. He also did shoe advertisements: he was grandson of James Clark, founder of Clark's shoes and lived in the town of Street, in Somerset, where the

factory was located. Neurath's interest presumably came from this link, and he acknowledges that perhaps nothing will come of it at all.

Nevertheless, this is possibly not the first time Neurath has thought about shoes in relation to everyday experience. At the *Gesellschafts-und Wirtschaftsmuseum*, the museum in Vienna that Neurath founded in 1926, the staff photographer took a number of photographs that seem to attend to feet and footwear. The explicit content of these photographs is work, specifically factory labour, but the images draw our attention to the male and female workers' shoes. This is to do with the fact that the machinery they were using was partly foot-operated, but also the photographer would have been aware that shoes were an indicator of wealth or deprivation, and of types of labour (the workman's steel boot, the woman worker's comfortable slipper and swollen ankle indicating long periods spent standing). Among the *Gesellschafts-und Wirtschaftsmuseum's* collections of photographs of the new state kindergartens, part of the social housing built by the socialist municipal government, are images of children tying their shoes. Such images have an obvious significance, indicating the child's, and the city's, growing prosperity as well as the development of independence through kindergarten education.

In 1941, Neurath used shoes as another example in his Cambridge lecture of 1941. In the lecture Neurath described how in the early 19th century in some countries "members of the ruling classes" wore tailcoats and high boots. Both items are related to horse riding originally (the tail coat freeing the knees). These men were not riding horses however but, Neurath suggested, it is not difficult to read in this fashion the implication that the wearer is a modern man – because of the relation between this outfit and riding a horse. However, in a critique of a certain kind of cultural analysis, Neurath argued that we can't use this technique "to analyse all our customs and all our institutions", finding everywhere "concealed intentions". He gives as another example a modern dancer:

"He has very low shoes, very nice low shoes and he has also perhaps tails. What is that for a strange combination? The low shoes are shoes of the Red Indians and of other people who are running on plains and the tails are horseman's clothes. So I imagine... somebody might write 'I see the comprehensive modern man in his feeling combine all types of human life: on horseback subconsciously in the tails and running on the plains subconsciously in his shoes'".

Neurath was not explicit what authors he had in his sights, merely that there are “dozens and dozens of books, seriously written of such a type”. This formed part of a larger argument where he set out his philosophy of logical empiricism and suggesting the importance of distinguishing between correlation and causality. Shoes, like fireplaces, are meaningful objects – and it is from such everyday, basic objects that we can learn lessons both for planning and design and for sociological study. These lessons are to do with the difficulties of disentangling overt symbolism and actual use, efficiency and meaning, of establishing causality and of the risk in making uninformed, under-researched changes to the everyday environment. Through these objects, and the everyday “muddling along” that they represent, Neurath was refining his politics of design and of decentralised planning.

Even in the 1940s, Neurath still wrote of the need to avoid dangerous, imprecise terms (“I never use the word ‘capital’,” he explained with pride in one letter in the mid-40s – and he bemoaned the difficulty people have in letting go of imprecise terms) yet as a number of Neurath experts have explained (notably Cartwright et al.) he also recognised that ordinary language was necessarily formed of *Ballungen* – imprecise clusters of concepts. Cartwright et al. also link “muddle” (as a specifically English quality) to Neurath’s opposition to over-centralised planning. Here, I want to add that Neurath’s interest in English muddle in the 1940s was accompanied by an increasingly thoughtful attention to the everyday objects through which daily life was made bearable, comfortable and pleasurable. These would form the basis of an approach to planning in which human happiness, not moral improvement, was the core value.

¹ The cut-off age for internees was 60, Neurath was 57. On June 4th Churchill acknowledged the indiscriminate nature of the internment policy: “I know there are a great many people affected by the orders which we have made who are the passionate enemies of Nazi Germany. I am very sorry for them, but we cannot, at the present time and under the present stress, draw all the distinctions which we should like to do.”

² Onchan District Commissioners Flickr site states that “On Thursday 24 May 1940, sixty householders in Royal Avenue West, Imperial Terrace, Belgravia Road and Belgravia Terrace received notice that their houses were being requisitioned to accommodate enemy aliens. Occupiers had to have left by 31 May and were ordered to leave all furniture, bedding, linen etc. These were mostly boarding houses and provided around five hundred bedrooms. Double fences of barbed wire were set up and ran down the centre of parts of four roads, including Royal Avenue West and Belgravia Road. The Main Gate was near the corner of Royal Avenue and Royal Drive and the Camp Head Quarters was across the road in the block of houses at the bottom of Royal Avenue. In June 1940 the first internees, 1,200 Germans, arrived at the Onchan Camp. This camp closed in July 1941 only to reopen in September of

the same year with Italian internees who were held there until November 1944.”

<https://flic.kr/s/aHsjE4dXnT>

³ Chappell, Connery, *Island of Barbed Wire* 40.

⁴ It was called The Royal Avenue Social Club. See Onchan District Commissioners Flickr site:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/88093414@N03/9520895627/>

⁵ I don't know if the courts were used. I do know of one game – called Witness – played by Imre Goth and other internees in a different male camp several streets away. A good friend of his, the artist M reports: “The game involved an elected group staging an incident with all sorts of details to be recalled, or not, by the rest of the group watching. Even though the audience group were looking to remember there was a high instance of contradictory / fabricated memories. Imre only told me of this game in relation to the unreliability of witnesses”

⁶ Otto Neurath, ‘Logical empiricism’, lecture given at Bedford college, Cambridge, November 9, 1941. the Otto Neurathnachlass microfilm collection, Institut Weiner Kreis, Vienna.

⁷ “International Planning for Freedom” 155

⁸ “International Planning for Freedom” 123

⁹ “International Planning for Freedom” 133

¹⁰ Winter was the author of a book called *Fluency in German*.

¹¹ Neurath letter to Joyce, 27 November 1944, Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype collection.

¹² Soule, Richard, *Dictionary of English Synonyms and Synonymous or Parallel Expressions*, Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1871.

¹³ Botching is at the more creative end of muddling along and it is of course not an exclusively English trait: so for example, when the landladies of the Onchan boarding houses finally got their homes back they discovered that the men had knocked doors through to get from one house in a terrace to another, had filled attics with soil to grow mushrooms, and had blocked the drains with radio parts, from the home-made radios they had cobbled together.

¹⁴ See for example: “We Americans, younger in form of self-government by many years than the English, can learn something from the manner in which the English "muddle" through adversity.” - A Strong Opposition Is Needed THE PROPER FUNCTIONS OF A MINORITY PARTY By KARL MUNDT, Member of Congress from South Dakota - Delivered in the House of Representatives, August 1, 1941 (<http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/1941/1941-08-01b.html>) Or – Harlow J. Heneman writing in the University of Michigan’s quarterly review of 1938, who questioned whether Britain could continue to “muddle along”.

¹⁵ Henning, Michelle, “The Pig in the Bath” in *Radical Philosophy*

¹⁶ Gaunt, William, 605.

¹⁷ R. Fitzmaurice, 501.

¹⁸ See for example the recent exhibition in Copenhagen on the chair: Hans J. Wegner – Just One Good Chair <http://www.designmuseum.dk/en/udstillinger/arkiv/2014/wegner>

¹⁹ Albers, Josef, “Art as Experience”, *Progressive Education Journal*, October 1935.

²⁰ Loos, Adolf, *Ornament and Crime*, 65.