

ENGAGEMENT AND EXHIBITIONISM IN THE ERA OF HIGH MODERNISM: THE EXAMPLE OF 1940S BILSTON

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ABSTRACT

The UK's Attlee government from 1946-51 oversaw the introduction of the Town and Country Planning Act in 1947, which created the UK's post-war planning and land rights system. The era's zeitgeist is typified by an experimental, utopian and enthusiastic embrace of modernism, evinced by a range of events. These included the Festival of Britain (1951) designed to revive a war weary public and commemorate the Great Exhibition of 1851. The Festival of Britain included a purpose-built estate, Lansbury, in London's East End to show in planning what the future could look like. This era's style of modernism has been too easily characterized as expert-driven, 'top-down' and instrumentalist, seeking to plan in isolation from the political process and at its most extreme from the public who were affected by the plans. This view of modernist planning is often contrasted with a 'bottom-up', insurgent and radical forms of planning which are said to have arisen more recently. This paper revisits these broad-brush assumptions about modernist planning by tapping into the zeitgeist of exhibitions during the UK's post-War reconstruction. The case of Bilston, a small un-bombed town in the Midlands is examined and specifically the exhibition that was used to propose its slum redevelopment. Bilston has already attracted scholarly attention as a case study in the role of early post-war consultants such as Professor Sir Charles Reilly. The present work focuses on the legacy of one of these consultants, the Austrian logical positivist Dr Otto Neurath. Neurath, sociologist, political economist, founder of the Unity of Science movement and housing activist had had some important interactions with the town planning movement internationally during the inter-war period. Most notable was his position as the only non-architect to be part of CIAM. In 1945 he was invited by the Town Clerk, A. V. Williams, to visit Bilston and to help with the redevelopment of the town. This paper focuses on the exhibitionary techniques and practices used by Neurath in his work on Bilston before his untimely death in December 1945. It argues that the engagement sought by Neurath in Bilston could easily be couched in more contemporary terms of 'empowerment' or 'citizen control', the top-most rung on the Arnstein ladder of participation. Highlighting cases such as these show that under the Attlee government between 1946-51 a different form of modernism briefly saw the light of day that speaks to contemporary examples of more radical planning practice. .

INTRODUCTION

In his seminal text on town planning theory in the UK, Nigel Taylor writes about the early critiques of the post-War planning system and in particular the lack of

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consultation that accompanied many planning exercises (Taylor, 1998). Planning during the early post-War period was characterized by a lack of consultation. This was not through cynicism or arrogance towards local needs, but simply because professional judgments about the physical living environment were assumed to be uncontentious, apolitical and technocratic. Furthermore, planning decisions were assumed to be universally applicable to a variety of different social contexts. Planning in the early post-War period was utopian, visionary but also naïve both politically and sociologically.

A range of influential authors echo this portrayal of consultation and collaboration in the early post-War period. Healey (1996) for example uses the idea of a comprehensive rational planning process to argue for the advent of a 'communicative turn' in planning. The straw man of the technocratic, expert-planner appears on a regular basis in other works when arguing for a comprehensive break with the past. For example, Sandercock (1998) seeks an epistemological break when arguing for a new agenda for radical planning. Beauregard (1989) describes planning's historical backdrop in the same way. A good deal of contemporary evidence supports this view. For example, Mumford notes that "throughout the 1920s, Le Corbusier maintained that he was an apolitical technocrat seeking only to apply the lessons of Frederick Winslow Taylor and Henry Ford to the production of housing and cities" (cited in Hochhaeusl, 2010 p. 148)

A highly influential paper that also informs these positions is Arnstein's (1969) which describes a hierarchy of participation for citizens, starting at the bottom where no power is given to citizens to take decisions (manipulation) and culminating at the top with citizen control. Informing occupies one of the lower rungs of the ladder and is held to be an inferior to consultation. 'When information is provided at a late stage in planning, people have little opportunity to influence the program designed "for their benefit". The most frequent tool used for such one-way communication are the news media, pamphlets, posters and responses to inquiries' (Arnstein, 1969).

Despite the evidence for the paucity of communicative consultation during the early-post War period, Freestone and Amati (2010) indicate that exhibitions provided a range of tools for displaying information that provided a richer, more collaborative experience than that implied by the informing rung of Arnstein's ladder. This history points to alternative ways in which we can understand the status of collaboration and communication during this period. During the pre-War period the nascent planning movement made full use of a range of different exhibitions. These included travelling, thematic, international and city exhibitions to name a few (Freestone and Amati, 2010). Exhibitions served a propangandising role to help the public and governments understand the necessity for planning legislation. The techniques and exhibits were developed by figures such as Otto Neurath and Patrick Geddes and drew on a range of advances in understanding about displays, interactivity, affect, and the use of multimedia (Henning, 2008). However, by the time Arnstein was to write her paper this rich variety of exhibitionary techniques had lost favour, being largely replaced by a set of procedures that were laid out by statute as planning oriented its focus towards zoning, land-use and development control.

In the same way that Sandercock (2004) calls for a re-casting of Arnstein's 'Therapeutic planning' (c.f. Gunder and Hiller, 2007), I wish to use a historical

moment of early post-War planning time to re-think the 'Informing' rung of Arnstein's ladder and to enrich the understanding of early-post War collaborative attempts. The exhibition in question is the Bilston 1946 Town Planning Exhibition. The exhibition was atypical in that it involved, the renowned international social scientist Dr Otto Neurath. Nonetheless the readiness with which Neurath's radical ideas were accepted in this centre of re-planning activity give us pause to question what happened to the variety of exhibitionary practices that dominated planning during the early 20th Century. The aim of this paper is to analyse the values of the Bilston exhibition and highlight its tentative, open-ended displays of information that expressly aimed to invite comment and reshape urban development.

EARLY POST-WAR EXHIBITIONARY PRACTICES

The early post-War period was a key time for exhibitions as Lilley and Larkham (2007) have shown. In this respect the end of the Second World War provided a key stimulus, inspiration and means for developing methods. A major exhibition on the temporary harbours that were used to facilitate the Normandy beach landings, known by their codename 'Mulberries', attracted a record peak of 8000 people in one day (TNA HLG 52/1180). This exhibition then travelled to Paris in 1945 (TNA FO 371/49202) and used demountable screens, which came to be known as the 'Mulberry Method'. This method was chosen in discussions about the exhibition to inform the public about the contents of the Greater London Plan, one of Patrick Abercrombie's masterpieces as it was found to be cheaper given the need to cater for other events, which had created a tight 'timber situation' (TNA HLG 52/1180). Such was the shortage of material that the exhibition curators, who included the seminal figure in post-War design of Mischa Black had had to turn down a request to exhibit the 'Meet Australia' exhibition.

The correspondence around the Greater London Plan exhibition reveals the interest that existed at the time in communicating planning ideas to lay people, in particular the techniques of 'Popular Mechanics' or 'Armchair Science' were proposed to be adopted. The tone of the exhibition was expressly to avoid a 'campaign to influence public opinion as to the desirability of Professor Abercrombie's plan.' Such was the importance of the exhibition that it was to be open six days a week for eight hours and on a Sunday for five hours. The correspondence also highlights the crowded exhibitionary timetable that the organisers of the event had to contend with. While Abercrombie had favoured the National Gallery for the exhibition, this was not available. Once deciding on the Institute of Civil Engineers as the location for the 4000 square feet displays and 3D models they had to then reschedule because the exhibition clashed with an engineering examination, then they had to reschedule again because a larger exhibition on the Japanese War was scheduled to open on the same day (TNA HLG 52/1180). The exhibition attracted a peak of 6,750 on one day and totalled, 76,390 between August 14th and September the 25th 1945.

This vignette provides an indication of the values that were associated with exhibiting plans in the early-post War period. It was interactive, as the key example of Lansbury in Poplar during the 1951 Festival of Britain shows, hopeful in fomenting debate and discussion and heuristic to educate a willing public in the need for planning.

THE BILSTON VENTURE

Bilston a suburb of Wolverhampton in the UK's midlands was one of the birthplaces of the industrial revolution with a nineteenth century legacy poor housing and environmental pollution. In explaining the motivation for the rehousing and its associated exhibition A M Williams explained that it was:

“a heavily industrialised area, in which there is no unemployment, but which requires its workers to live in conditions which are not merely depressing, dirty and inconvenient, but which actually constitute a serious menace to the health of parents and the lives of their children.” (Williams, 1947)

Bilston was one of a number of small towns that had not been substantially bomb-damaged but that took advantage of the planning zeitgeist to engage in urban redevelopment (Larkham and Pendlebury, 2006). The planning work done in Bilston has already attracted some scholarly attention. Larkham (2009) examines the figures behind the planning experiment, and in particular the work of Sir Charles Herbert Reilly who saw Neurath's recommendations realised through his "Neighbourhood Architecture". Other scholars such as Nikolow (2004) and Whyte (2007) have focused more on the work of Otto Neurath in Bilston. Nikolow (2004) in particular provides an excellent analysis of the captivating ISOTYPE charts that were used in the exhibition. This paper aims to extend this work by focusing on Bilston as an early example of collaborative exhibiting.

Much has been written about Otto Neurath, a fascinating inter-War intellectual figure. Normally referred to as a social scientist he was known as a polymath, socialist, and a member of the Vienna Circle of logical positivists. Researchers from areas as diverse as museum and cultural studies (e.g. Henning, 2007; 2008), philosophy of science (Nikolow, 2004; Okruhlik, 1998), graphic design (Jansen, 2009) and planning (Faludi, 1989; Vossoughian, 2006; Larkham, 2006) have all drawn on his career, techniques and ideals. Archives of his life and work are distributed in Vienna, the Hague, and the ISOTYPE institute at the University of Reading.

Neurath's work intersected at various points with planning during his long international career. Firstly, during the 1920s, he became involved with the Viennese cooperative housing movement that was established to deal with the shortage of housing following the end of the First World. He was instrumental in getting some very distinguished modern architects to work with the housing movement and helped to set up the Museum for Housing and Urban Development in Vienna (Okruhlik, 1998). The exhibits did not attempt to show lay people architectural design but instead showed them why housing ought to be their concern (Neurath, 1947). As it became clear that to understand housing it was necessary to understand the whole social situation this museum was later transformed into the Museum of Social Science in Vienna. This city museum combined a range of innovative exhibitionary ideas to enable workers in particular to access the relevant information. These included electric lighting to enable after-hours viewing and panels that elegantly summarised statistical information in bold visual displays, a technique which came to be known as ISOTYPE (Henning, 2008). Secondly Neurath became a member of the International Congress of Modern Architects (CIAM). As the sole non-architect

member Neurath's work contributed to the development of a universal language of communication. He participated in the 'Functional City' congress in 1933 travelling with the other delegates aboard the SS Patris II from Marseilles to Athens (Vossoughian, 2006, Hochhaeusl, 2010). Thirdly, after arriving in England during the Second World War he was invited by Bilston Borough Council in 1945 to examine the problem of rehousing slum dwellers in the area. As a newspaper explained at the time it was the first appointment of its kind in England with Neurath being described as a "*sociologist of happiness*" to "*see that the planners know what the people want*" (Baron, 1945).

The local authority in Bilston had for some time envisaged a scheme to combine an educational drive with a housing drive. The Town Clerk A V Williams, an active Labour member was widely read in planning and sociology (Larkham, 2009). He led a comprehensive 'Civic Survey' in 1944 which highlighted the health problems of Bilston residents (e.g. consistently higher birth deaths than the rest of England and Wales) the air pollution and the large number of blighted houses. Of the 7,771 houses in the district 34% of these were blighted, a further 16% were in poor condition (Williams, 1947).

In 1945 J. N. Smallshire, one of the councilors attended a talk at the International Friendship League given by Neurath in Wolverhampton and invited him to Bilston (Henning, 2007). The visit was short lived as Neurath arrived in July but by December he had passed away.

At his introduction to the council Neurath outlined his attitude towards the people in Bilston as a memoir of his visit written by A. V. Williams makes clear. There was some concern that the people to be re-housed, were beyond redemption, in particular, that they might use their new bathroom to store coal. In response to this:

"Dr Neurath stated that he wished to make a number of basic points clear: First the percentage of truly anti-social persons in any [...] community is so small as to be almost negligible. Secondly, within reasonable limits, there must be the greatest possible decentralisation of administration - administration must go to the people and not vice versa; and in the third place, all people tend to strive to the utmost of their ability toward a higher standard of living" (Neurath and Cohen, 1973 p. 75).

These basic points are substantiated by Neurath's attitude towards the sharing of information and especially the involvement of the people who are being planned.

"The whole success of any plan involving the lives of human beings depends on obtaining the assent, encouragement and cooperation of those human beings" (Neurath and Cohen, 1973, p. 76)

The humanism of Neurath's approach is also reflected in his attention to the needs of the minorities in the population: children and the elderly. For this reason he advocated against the use of large 'green belts and large playgrounds' and instead for something that was more compact where the children could be contained and passively surveyed (Neurath and Cohen, 1973, p. 77). He also advocated the mixing of individuals: married and un-married, the aged, etc. In particular he wanted to avoid the creation of ghettos. He advocated the studying of the existing community structure in the slum and making sure that

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these connections were not broken during the creation of a new community. Finally, he dealt with the issue of information provision: pamphlets and lectures had to be used with care as people did not like to have information thrust upon them. For this reason, we can suppose that he preferred the exhibition as a more passive and entertaining delivery mechanism. To avoid the impression of forcing information on people he advocated a deliberately indirect approach:

'For example, an exhibition which is intended to be part of a campaign for the immunization of children against diphtheria could be presented as an exhibition of the wonders of scientific achievements in the field of medical science. Housing and happiness could form the subject of an exhibition. If people think about what they have seen they will arrive at a conclusion of their own; in this way they may learn how they might achieve a better way of living by their own efforts through participation in their government' (Neurath and Cohen, 1973, p. 78).

There were significant parallels between the ideas of A V Williams, those of Dr Robert Abbott, Chairman of the Bilston Health Committee and Otto Neurath. Williams presented a paper at the Town and Country Planning Summer School entitled "*Public Education in Planning*" while Neurath was engaged in Bilston, in which he outlined the merits of public education in planning. In particular, Williams describes needing to bring the administration to the people, rather than the other way round. This was to be physically manifested by 'decentralisation' of services such as small libraries and clinics embedded and run by the community. Invoking Patrick Geddes, he stated that "*the only effective education for the public in planning is through actual processes and products of planning*" (Williams, 1945).

Citing the need to involve the public at all stages of planning, even the survey stage, he highlighted the role of the exhibition in fostering community interest:

"Local exhibitions of this kind have been found to produce satisfactory responses from the public who, finding considerable personal satisfaction in reducing a problem to the level of their own social contribution and requirements, are ready to come forward with criticism and suggestion as to how the town should be planned." (Williams, 1945)

Williams' concern with the need for embedding services and planning in the community paralleled that of Neurath's experience of making exhibitions for lay people. Using this rationale the exhibition was housed in a derelict shop in the centre of town.

Dr Robert Abbott was also similarly receptive to Neurath's ideas. Speaking during a BBC broadcast as part of the Midland Home Service to promote the exhibition, he highlighted the problems that had arisen during the inter-War years when the first attempts were made to re-house slum-dwellers: 'At that time families were simply moved from their very depressing conditions to their new houses. There they were left in their new houses and expected automatically to adapt themselves to a new and better environment. Well, as many of you know, it wasn't long before the standards of these estates began to go down...' (Abbott, 1946) Like Neurath, Abbott held to the assumption that slum dwellers were far from being beyond redemption. The exhibition was seen to be an integral way of preparing these tenants for the move before it should occur: 'go to the depths of the Black Country, to Oxford Street in Bilston where

in a few minutes you will learn more about re-housing problems than a month of concentrated study could teach you.' (Abbott, 1946)

The exhibition opened on the 6th of November 1946 attracting interest from the media for a variety of reasons. It was unusual in being hosted in a slum area instead of a large public building. The exhibition also made use bright posters outside the building and a formicarium which was visible from the street through one of the windows. It was placed in such a way that people would have to come into the exhibition to see the ants (Birmingham Gazette, 1946).

This hopeful, open-ended approach to the provision of information is clearly seen in the questions posed to the onlookers and the layout of information displayed. At the entrance to the exhibition, visitors were given a small pamphlet which said on the cover: 'Bilston has many problems, you know what they are. Perhaps you have some suggestions for solving them. This exhibition shows a few of the problems and suggests some answers. If you will help by visiting it an thinking about what you see, we can all work together to build our Bilston' (Neurath, 1947).

On the inside a whole page was given over to a discussion of the reason for the formicarium display. Reference is made to the evolution of ants communities, with the most primitive being largely individual: 'In the earlier ant communities each ant seems to work more for itself and does not bother much about the others' (Anon, 1946). The most evolved communities on the other hand have a clear division of labour 'They have gained more of their primitive individuality, not lost it, yet there is greater co-operation (greater in many ways than men) and a greater division of work' (Anon, 1946).

On the facing page twelve blocks of text corresponded to the different panels. These descriptions contained large numbers of questions, which were designed to provoke a response in the audience. Figure 1 shows a summary of these blocks of text with the most pertinent question italicised. As the Bilston residents worked their way round the room (Figure 2) they would be exposed to a flow of information. Broadly, the exhibition could be conceived as presenting two problems. One, the problem of housing and then a number of sub-problems and solutions. Two, the problem of pollution, which was conceived of more simply as needing a technical fix. The two problems came together in panels 9 and 10 which observed through charts that fewer children die in their first year in sunnier parts and that adults are healthier in bigger houses because of the reduced likelihood of infection. The exhibition ended on another sociological observation that Bilston was built mainly for work but that now leisure was increasingly required by its citizenry. This would have prompted an interested onlooker to think about larger forces that would govern the shape of Bilston into the future.

Remarkably, while there are clearly biases and structure to guide the attendees the key difference between this exhibition and many others at the time of today is that it was not being used as a tool of assent. In other words, there is no description of what will be done, and therefore an expectation that attendance at the exhibition meant an implicit condoning of the exhibited works.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

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As Whyte (2007) notes, little came of the Bilston experiment: 'The exhibition was closed prematurely following pressure from opposition parties in the council while funding was withdrawn from the central government after only 165 houses had been built'

The 1946 Bilston Exhibition however stands out as an example of a brief of time when the "*hopes of a democratic public were focused on transparency and on people's right to have a say in civil planning through local governments.*" (Nikolow, 2004). Neurath's ideas were at odds with prevailing ideas at the time. For example his focus on the need for small compact spaces, the need for mixing are at odds with the prevailing ideas that a city could be functionally separated into different components. Similarly his emphasis on the need for small spaces for children to play and his rejection of the green belt idea reflects his urban Viennese upbringing. Such design considerations are clearly closer to Jane Jacobs' *Life and Death of American Cities* than they are to Lewis Keeble's *Town Planning Theory*, pointing to ways in which Neurath and the Bilston venture counters the prevailing wisdom of the modernist planner as being disconnected and expert-driven.

This counter point to the prevailing wisdom is also shown tentatively in the Greater London Plan Exhibition. The exhibition contained much of what would be expected to be typical for the time: a panel of experts including Patrick Abercrombie present at the exhibition opening, and a large central location to fit with the centrality and importance of the plan. There was above all a heuristic purpose but also an assumption about the inherent neutrality of the information being delivered. However naively, the curators and planners at the time assumed that this information was empowering. Neurath and the Bilston exhibition therefore probably represents an extreme on a continuum rather than an isolated example. Further research will concentrate on supporting this claim.

Whilst Neurath's work in Bilston may seem relevant to the 1940s before the electoral defeat the Attlee government in October 1951, it is also important to consider the role that exhibitions and cultures of display play in the current era. For Arnstein, the limitations of the medium meant that the provision of information was only ever going to be one sided, leading to manipulation and tokenism. Neurath however attempted to transcend these limitations through the development of a universal language of communication. In the era of the internet information is co-produced by both authorities and users. This may lead to a re-distribution of power that Arnstein sought but not without the respect, humanism and transfer of authority towards the community that Neurath ideals clearly espoused.

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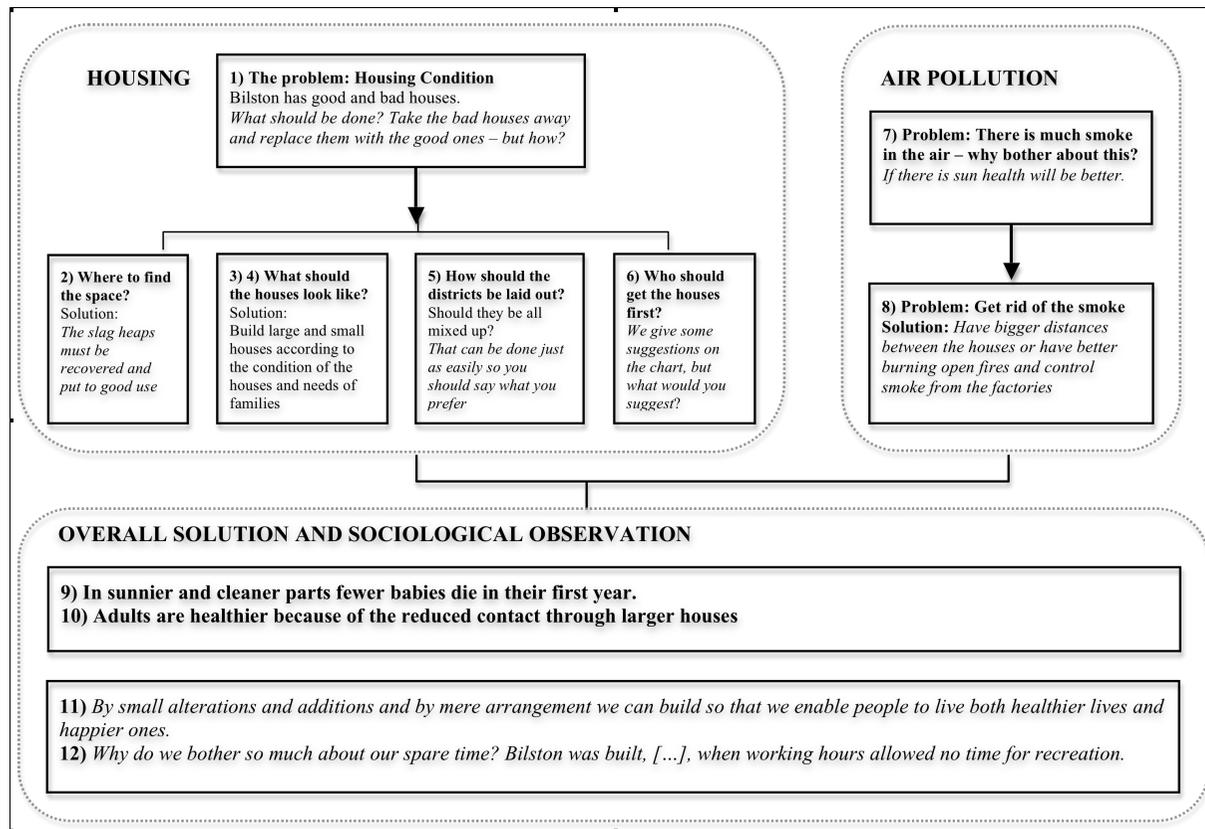


Figure 1: Flow chart showing the content of the Bilston 1946 exhibition (based on Neurath, 1947 and Anon 1946)

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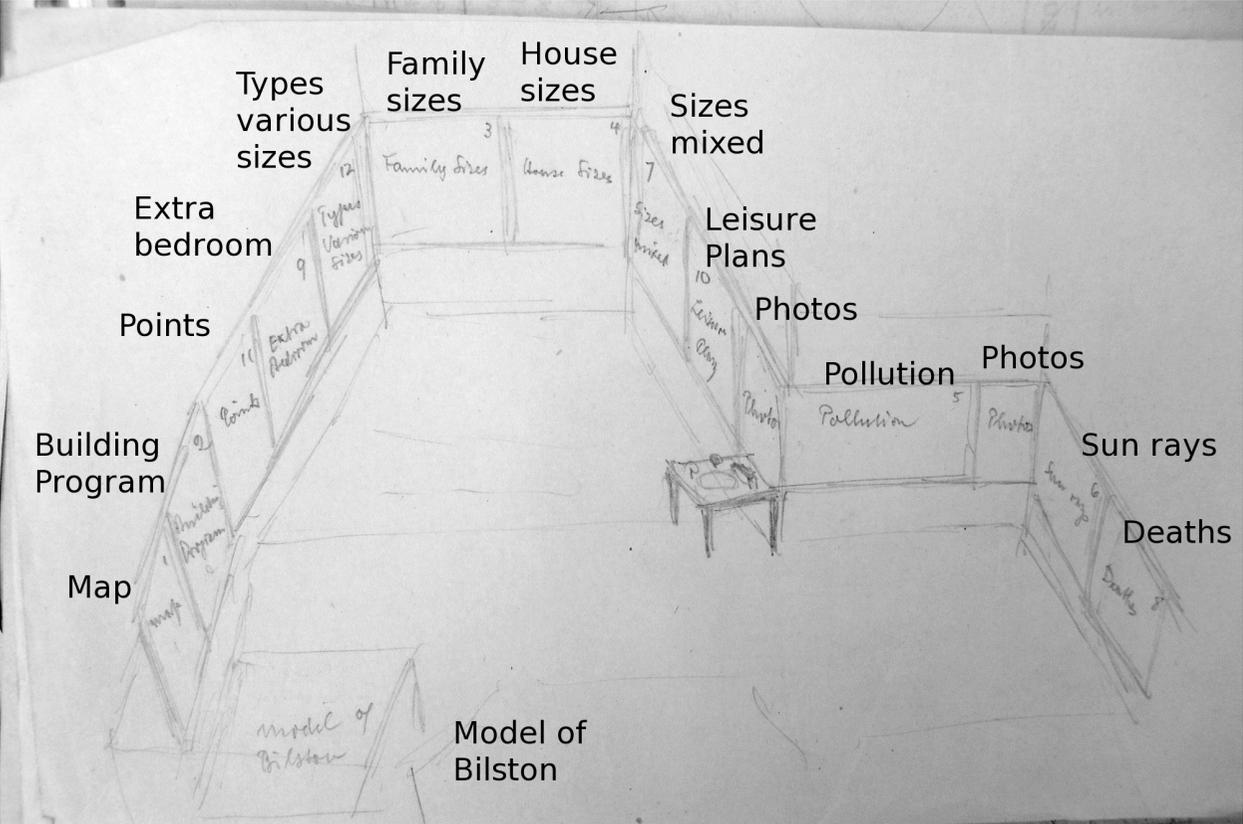


Figure 2: sketch of the layout of the Bilston 1946 exhibition (Isotype collection, University of Reading)