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and policy, and I couldn’t be happier in my work.” He doesn’t need much sleep, is often the first to turn up in the morning and finds it difficult to tear himself away in the evening even after everyone else is long gone.

IT JUST GREW AND GREW His office is at the end of the corridor in the department of Spatial Economics. Under his leadership, the department has grown since 1975 into a prestigious institute with a staff of eighty. New topics kept on attracting his interest: environmental economics, transport economics, urban development, migration, complexity theory (the use of models to predict the behaviour of complex systems). Most of the topics he touched just grew and grew, and attracted more and more research funding. Till the department needed a new professor to lead the research, and Peter Nijkamp moved on to a new topic. “Each time I got to that point, I would look for someone who was better in that particular field. But I always found great empty spaces. Where you don’t have something, you may become an absolute authority in that field.”

A MOSAIC OF POSTAGE STAMPS Another congress he attended recently was that of the Network on European Communications and Transport Activity Research (NECTAR, which he helped to set up. Home models, as a traveller, was one of my interests at a given moment. I enjoyed formulating a strategy to bring various interests in this field together. My attempts were successful, and NECTAR now boasts a colourful mosaic made up of postage stamps devoted to the theme of research.”

By Riande Lindhout

Peter Nijkamp (born in 1946) would like to be a student again. Law, maybe, biology, or history. And yet, as the first university professor at VU University Amsterdam, he seems to be right at the other end of the scale. This spatial economist is at the very peak of the pyramid. He has more freedom than other professors, more research funding and no administrative or teaching obligations. In fact, this set-up does allow Peter Nijkamp to remain something of a student. One who has always worked hard because everything was so interesting, and now has a bit more free time to devote to the topics that really fascinate him. Not a bad position for someone with the wide range of interests he has. Thanks to his reputation, people keep on turning up with exciting new jobs. “You do have a potential at the vast array of things that get presented to me every day,” he says. “Fortunately, I have no trouble switching from one topic to another. I’m a real workaholic, but my interests cover a wide field of science and economic problems. Of course, diversity is also an absolute commitment not to be guided by his emotions but to discover how the world worked by hard scientific analysis.”

This attitude suited Peter Nijkamp down to the ground. He had always wanted to understand how unfortunate economic conditions came about. “In many cases, they are not due to ill will. No one wanted the wave of unemployment that followed the closure of the coal mines in southern Limburg or the textile industry in Twente. No one wants to see his or her country’s development to come to a stop. But these things are driven by inevitable economic laws. A scientist is not a crystal-gazer or a preacher: he has to filter information, formulate concepts and come up with explanations. That is my motivation.”

In his office, Peter Nijkamp works on articles for dozens of economics journals or talks to students – for example, on the VU Multicultural Event he is organizing with their assistance. He travels a lot. Shortly before this interview, he was in New Zealand for a conference on migration, a topic he has been interested in for a number of years. When Geert Wilders claimed that immigrants only cost the Netherlands money, Peter Nijkamp decided to investigate the truth of this assertion. “In fact, migrants contribute a lot to the Dutch economy. Migration leads to more innovation, one of the key conditions for long-term economic growth. Of course, diversity requires effective management to combat the mutual prejudice and conflicts it brings in its wake.”

MOBILE MAN Did you too think that advances in IT led to less physical transport and were therefore good for the environment? It seems a reasonable proposition. Former US President Bill Clinton was among its advocates; the idea has had political consequences. But it is not true. IT is more than working from home and sending less mail by post. University professor and special economist Peter Nijkamp became interested in the topic. What is the real relationship between IT and mobility?” Your range of action increases: you get to know more people and can work with them more easily. But after all those E-mails and Facebook contacts, you want to meet face to face. You may save time by travelling to and from work less, but you make up for it by unscheduled mobility. That’s how people are made. Meeting people is a source of inspiration. IT is no substitute.

Thanks to Nijkamp’s research in this field, policy-makers now have a more balanced view of the green credentials of IT developments. For a while, more and more goods are ordered online, they still have to be delivered physically to your door...