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Small Change:

The art of practice and the limits of planning in cities

Nabeel Hamdi. 2004. Earthscan, London. 1-84407-005-0. \$39.00 (paper) 156 pages,

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Small Change by Nabeel Hamdi is a short, but provocative, book on development planning and how it can be practiced and taught. Born in Afghanistan of Iraqi parents, Hamdi trained as an architect and worked on award-winning housing projects for the Greater London Council. Later, after teaching at MIT, he became a professor of housing and urban development at Oxford Brookes University, and has a rich experience in participatory action planning and slum rehabilitation projects in various parts of the world.

This book is about turning planning paradigms on their heads. One key observation is that genuine development in developing nations' cities is a product of *emergence*, not top-down planning. It is a process whereby "problems are solved by drawing on a variety of information from the multitude of small, relatively simple and local elements, rather than from some power elite or single brain..." It is a process whereby slum dwellers begin to think in "we" terms and where the benefits of collective action come to enhance the lives of individuals.

Hamdi recognizes the need for institutional structure and continuity, but not so much that it stifles spontaneity and bottom-up initiative. It is essential to get a few very small things right at a local level, and then allow these to "trickle up" through a process of emulation, partnerships, and supportive policy development. In effect, he proposes to reverse the time-honoured planning triad of survey-analyze-plan. He suggests conducting action planning at a small, local scale, then proceeding to larger-scale plans based on community and local government partnerships. It is at this point that conducting evaluation of best options, analyzing knowledge gaps and possible impacts, and engaging in data gathering, will prove most useful.

This is a cyclical, not a linear, process, and the planning initiatives that start it off can be as modest as creating or enhancing a bus stop, which can become a focal point for the micro-enterprise activities that are already occurring in a community. While these small-scale interventions may be relatively spontaneous and incremental, they can be crafted with a view to their longer-term strategic significance: how they can help prepare for more ambitious action, and how they can help disenfranchised people negotiate with public and private authorities from a position of greater strength.

Hamdi starts from the premise that the integration of different kinds of thinking is needed: what Danah Zohar calls *serial*, *associative*, and *holistic*, and what Hamdi calls the intellect, mind, and spirit of the brain. Serial thinking is something planners are very familiar with. It involves defining goals, setting tasks, evaluating evidence, collecting facts, and searching for precedence and logic.

Associative thinking seeks to make connections, uses prior experience,

and learns by trial and error. And holistic thinking is our capacity to break out of the box, to find new solutions, new ways of doing things: to reassemble parts into new wholes. It consists of the ineffable process of artistry that cannot be fully explained by rational means. The type of planning Hamdi advocates involves all three modes of thinking, and acknowledgement of, and skill in integrating, them is not something well taught in our current educational system, something Hamdi tries to address in his educational practice.

While I found this brief, small-format book – only 156 pages, including references and index – to be stimulating, paradoxically it is also quite dry. The best parts are where he illustrates his philosophy by drawing on examples from his own experience and that of others, and where he offers guidelines in the form of action principles. The book could have benefited from a closer editing, as there were a number of grammatical and spelling errors in the text and in the references. However, these shortcomings notwithstanding, *Small Change* is a worthy addition to the literature available for planning and development courses.