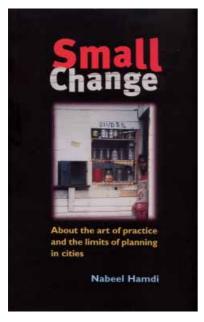**NABEEL HAMDI**
SMALL CHANGE: THE ART OF PRACTICE AND THE LIMITS OF PLANNING IN CITIES

AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR NABEEL HAMDI, OXFORD BROOKES UNIVERSITY, OXFORD, UNITED KINGDOM ON "COMMUNITY DESIGN TODAY" (1)

UT: *Dear Professor Hamdi, thank you very much for accepting our invitation for an interview. How would you define community design, based on your academic and professional experience?*

NH: To some extent, it worries me as a term, because I suppose it implies a design process that is restricted to community needs and very few processes are restricted that way, but we can come back to that later on. In general, I would define it really as a process which engages grass-root organizations as partners in the design, implementation, and management of programs. That's really the way I see it. It is a process and it is grass roots, and importantly, it implies communities as partners rather than as recipients of our work.

UT: *Who are your "clients" in community design projects? How do they contact you? Or, do you search for "clients"? Do you work with local governments on community design projects?*

NH: In general, the clients as it were in community design projects are multiple. Increasingly, I suppose, that goes back to my definition, or at least discomfort, with community design, because it implies that communities are the principle stakeholders in community design, and, of course, to you and I they may well be, as we tend to focus, of course, our work at a community level. However, in pursuit of good governance, we know that the model nowadays is really an arrangement in which we work somewhere in between the state, the market, and community or civil society. So that's where, we become catalysis to it. So for me, my clients are all three partners, and I think the real challenge in most of our work is how we balance the needs between one and the other in order to arrive at an equitable project or program. Usually we know that in the -- kind of good governance model there's that three triad relationship; power relations are not equal. As you know, the diagram is often drawn equally, and it isn't. So part of our relationship to all stakeholders in engaging community is to empower them in a way that they have (not an equal voice, because that's unrealistic, but at least) a voice that counts, and so many of our client relations when it comes to community are relations that, I suppose, help us or help them have a voice to that extent.

I never get contacted by community. One of the real problems, in the international development business is that most of the initial contact comes from outside. Now that outside maybe a host government, through an NGO, or through their international connections or, indeed, an international agency. It is a little complex in the sense that, for example, you have the Department of International Development here; the UK Aid Agency. I like U.S. Aid who come along and say, "Hey, look, we're interested in doing projects with Country X. Our principal aims are to do with privatization, greater market share, and sorting out housing problems or whatever they maybe". So, I find myself, first of all, having to meet the needs of the funding client, the guy who is giving the money, and then, of course, taking those to a host government, sorting out what host government needs are - and when I say host government sometimes it's at a municipality level. Most times it's a central authority, like the Housing Department or the Education Department, and then they'll come along and say, "Yes, we have to go along with the privatization agenda, but actually what we really need is a decent water supply system that can be managed by women," in which case we then have to go to the project level and talk to communities about that, and I find most times they are also saying, "Yeah, great. Water is a great idea, but frankly our principal concern is education for our kids."

So immediately in those three arrangements, as it were, we have three different agendas. We have the outsiders interested in privatization. The government is interested in water, for example, and the community is interested in education. The question then is about the real entrepreneurial skills of practice: How do you bring those three agendas together? So, it may well be that we're looking at the market in the way it relates to government on water, and the way in which water becomes a key educational element, for example - I'm just contriving it here. So the skill of development programs is to look to collapse or at least combine or connect development programs in a way that makes sense to all partners. So I answered the first part of the question: How do they contact us? Usually from outside; I wished one would be

contacted directly by community, but they don't have the power or the money.

Most of my work comes either directly from outside through agencies or sometimes where I get together with other university departments, and we think, "Look, it would be great to do a research project on this or that." It maybe on the sustainability aspects of first disaster reconstruction or whatever it might be, and we write a proposal, and we interest the government or authority or grant authority in it. We then have to get local partners, and usually a local partner -- one of the local partners has to be a municipality, because that's the only way we can get into countries as it were, but at the same time we say we must work within community, and so we need a community counterpart. Sometimes it's a municipality; sometimes it's an NGO, it depends.

ZT: *Nonprofit international organizations are sometimes criticized for not being able to connect with the communities and local governments and fail to create ownership of the project that is proposed in the end. Did you find this to be a problem in your experience?*

NH: I think you're absolutely right. There are occasions when that is absolutely the case. I think the search for a local non-government partner is an absolutely key part of most programs. It's interesting working with NGOs, because again if you go back to that model of the state, the market, and the civil society, very often the non-government sector believes itself to represent civil society, and you have to judge whether that's real or not. So often the non-government sector may not be represented. In fact, not an NGO in the traditional sense of holding the ideals that we all aspire to as a non-government organization, but really as private enterprise. So we do have to be very careful in that respect, and I think the question of representation when one is an outsider like me looking for a local partner is absolutely key, and very often I start my projects by literally training our local partner, our NGO partner, or our university partner in process and procedures. So we'll work together in sorting out what we need to do and how we're going to go about doing it before they take the principal role. Then I act as backstop. I act as a sort of a resource

in that respect. But, yes, your question is valid. It's part of the complexity of the business.

UT: *What's your experience with community design centers or any community development cooperation in the UK or other countries?*

NH: Well, it's interesting that I do remember the design centers in the U.S. and they were and are a great initiative, and I have wondered, although I'm not sure whether or not they have the same function as the organizations that I get involved with now overseas which are Open Resource Centers. There is one in Sri Lanka I worked with and in India. They provide all kinds of resources. Some of them come in the form of professional skills and support. Some of those resources come in information about who you need to contact; how to dodge the system in order to avoid eviction on land; how to access appropriate technologies for building houses or whatever it might be, and I'm not up-to-date with the design centers in the U.S. but it sounds to me like they perform a similar function, but they do go beyond what I remember the design centers doing in the states, but beyond simply a technical service, a consulting service as such, so they do follow all that.

In this country, the closest we get is a couple of organizations that are similar to design center. The Neighborhood Initiative's Foundation is one of them. Tony Gibson started it up with application of the "planning for real" tools. They work very locally with communities, and they provide all sorts of services and training programs, and you can go there and learn the latest in participatory techniques and negotiation skills and that sort of stuff. So that's a good one.

And then there's the Walter Segal Trust in London which is again -- I call a resource center, but it's equivalent to your design centers which has all kinds of resources that it offers for self-builders. The guys who build their own houses, communities, and individual families, and it was started up by Walter Segal, who started his business on building simple frames. In that sense I have worked with them as local host NGOs; certainly in India and in Sri

Lanka they have been my counterparts on tsunami reconstruction.

ZT: *How is working with Open Resource Centers different from working for nonprofit international organizations?*

NH: Those two worlds are merging, and I find it sometimes very difficult. For example, the Neighborhood Initiative's Foundation is an NGO. The two in India and in Sri Lanka I mentioned are also nongovernmental organizations. They are nongovernmental not for profit organizations.

So NGO'S are setting themselves up, quite rightly, I think, as resource centers are offering all sorts of skills, resources, and information and so on. So they've kind of merged a bit. I think Oxfam for example, or Save the Children or CARE increasingly see themselves as resource organizations. If you go into the CARE office in Delhi, for example, it's a huge operation, and I wouldn't really classify it as small NGO, but nonetheless it is a resource center. It's an urban resource center and they run training programs. There are all sorts of stuff they do through there, so I think that they are merging in a way.

UT: *In your recent book "Small Change"*(**2**)*, you refer to holistic thinking in planning and design. You remind us of professionals who work based on preconceived notions of community, and assumptions on individuals' needs and roles. Yet, as you also acknowledge in your book, many schools of architecture are still based on educating individuals like this. The "star system" goes hand-in-hand with this understanding. Which ways or methods do you think could be efficient in increasing awareness of faculty and students about participatory design?*

NH: You're absolutely right. There are two biggest barriers to this business: One, are the staff, and two, are the professional institutes. The struggle I'm having here to recognize that communities or civil society are a partner in the design process is huge, because they are saying, "Well, no. It's architects who lead". My response is "Yes, well, it may well be, but in partnership with whom?" We're very familiar with partnering up with the engineering professions and the quantity surveyors and all these others, but surely there's an expert world that

2. Hamdi, Nabeel (2004) *Small Change: The Art of Practice and the Limits of Planning in Cities*, Earthscan, Paperback; ISBN 1-844-070-050; September 2004 (160 pages; 220 x 135 mm; figures, index)

is missing, and that is to do what those who really know best about their own needs, and that's the community. So I'm arguing it increasingly on pragmatic rather than ideological grounds, and I think that's important. I think we have to move first of all off the idea that community design or participatory processes, participatory design has to do with saving poor people and empowering the vulnerable. Of course, you and I know it is that, but nevertheless that's not one that goes down that well. I tend to argue it primarily on pragmatic grounds. I would not dare to put up a sophisticated building without an engineer. In the same way as how do we dare to put up a sophisticated settlement without a community as such? So I ask the first thing to actually begin to talk about partnerships rather than, as in the old days, the ideological debate about participation as being an equitable empowering and all that sort of stuff.

The second thing in that respect, particularly on the professional side, before we actually get to the sort of the student side, is that if one looks at the international development models that are emerging, particularly on good governance practice; we get back to the issue of the importance of the role that civil society plays. We have seen that politically as well as we have seen it in the context of the built in environment, and so raising the awareness of faculty really has to do with raising their awareness in terms of the cities. We're talking about urban management here, not just sort of a side thing that we do in the evenings. It's about the proper way of managing cities. Examples are everywhere. We're not inventing it. We look at all sorts of ways in which the informal private sector run bus services; fire services; schools. Even in this country, and I'm not talking about in developing countries the situation here, we have in London a bus service run by a community in partnership with the public authority.

So I think raising the awareness of faculty has to do with raising an awareness that that is the way things are; nothing is being invented, and if we can recognize it, then we can engage with it in our teaching, which then brings us, of course, to the student side.

There are two principle approaches that I follow. The first one is what we call "problem driven learning". The best example that I give is that, imagine that you're trying to get from A to B and improve access in transportation. A project or at least a top down driven learning process is that I would stand up and I would say, "If you want to do this, the best way is by building a road, and the road has to be constructed in this way and that way and all the rest of it, and on this road we would put so many cars and so on". In other words I would teach based on prescribed good practice as it were; nothing wrong with that. The problem driven approach leaves it open, and it says, "Look, we want to get to A and B. How should we do it?" And the students themselves begin to brainstorm the different ways in which we can do it. One way is building a road. The other way is improving communication that may not have anything to do with better road building, but using existing tracks for example. And then they will talk about, "Well, yes, but we don't want to build a road that destroys this village and this environment." So suddenly an environmental program comes to bare. So the problem driven approach is already inclusive of other people and other ideas.

The second, is a lot more field-base work. That is where we start our work, any project; design work in community working with people to figure out what's necessary, what their feelings and aspirations are; what their priorities are and so on. You can call that just the program development side of things, and it's a fun way of doing it, and engages people in the mess outside.

The third is the use of role play in studio work. That is the idea that the students change roles throughout the learning process in the studio. For example, I'm running a studio at the moment on shelter and settlement after disasters, and the students have started as being formed into "livehood groups", - ritual drivers, garbage collectors and all that. And their settlements have been destroyed, and they are living with extended families at the moment, but the government is looking for a site for resettlement. They are role playing community, and they are immersing themselves in what it means to have lost everything, and they are beginning to look at what their strengths are, in other

words, what their assets are; what their priorities are and so on. So they start the role of community as it were, and then they regroup into architects and respond to that role. When they are architects, they will have the role that represents their previous groups, but now they are also architects, and that's the complexity. So, they are always sensitive to the importance of their community client.

There are other techniques, but those are some of the ways that I tend to engage and sensitize both faculty and students to participatory design. It's a pragmatic agenda.

UT: *In recent literature, the understanding of the term "community" seems to have shifted towards an entity that can be created by certain design features, an understanding which is also referred to as "spatial determinism". While spatial determinism seems to get more popular, the term "community" also seems to be understood more and more as merely a physical setting. Have you found this to be a problem in your experience? Do you think participatory designers need a new set of terms, starting with the term "community design", for example?*

NH: Yes, I think you're right. I think the first issue which is this spatially determined way in fact of creating community. There are important, and, I think, useful ways in which it can be encouraged. There is no question about it. There are special ways in which communities can be either encouraged or discouraged. We see that all over. The trouble is that the assumption that it's based on, particularly in cities, is no longer valid, and the assumption is based on in cities is that communities are place-based, and the one thing that we're finding in communities in cities is that communities are less and less place-based. In fact, the concept of community has many different associations, and the question really is then who do we engage when we talk about community participation, and what kind of community are we putting in place. Bill Mitchell talks about the whole networked way in which business is done in cities creating a -- what I call "community of practice". It's entirely networked. It doesn't even need to sit anywhere anymore, which creates an entirely different concept of the office place. So I think two things are the place-based assumption on the base

of which stands spatial determinism and the definition and concept of community itself as it's emerging, particularly in urban settings. There are communities of interest that form depending on a particular set of interest. It may be an activist interest. You're closing the street, because a kid has been sort of knocked down, or you're trying to object to a development in your backyard or whatever it might be. These are communities that come and go, and we all tend to be apart of them or not depending how they affect us.

There are communities of practice, which is our workplace essentially. There are communities of place, which is where we live. There are communities of culture, which again are network, because our cultural networks are city-wide, and then there are these odd things that we're still kind of struggling with. Some have called them communities of resistance, which I find fascinating, particularly in cities emerging from conflict. You know, people who have been displaced who have a history and a future. They have a past and aspirations, but no present at all, and the question is really how to engage that kind of community in reconstruction as it were. So if you look at those, we have at least a community of interest, a community of practice, a community of place, and a community of culture.

ZT: *Do you have typical techniques you find useful in your community design projects? Can you exemplify several of them?*

NH: There are three that I draw on principally. One is a whole world of techniques under the title "Planning for Real". It comes out of Neighborhood Initiative's Foundation with a lot of the mapping and modeling techniques and a lot of participatory techniques. For example, the way in which we may start a project off doing resource surveys; which, really, are surveys done by communities but with our help on, who's got skills, who's got equipment, who's got knowledge, who's got good contacts; mobilizing local resources as a first step before you go outside and get some help. The idea is that you've got an awful lot locally before you go outside, so let's try and capitalize on that, and there are other planning for

real processes that enable us to make that documentation.

Another one is the "participatory rapid appraisal" bundle, which comes out of Sussex University in Brighton by Robert Chambers and his crowd. Again, these techniques have to do with the use of diagramming community maps and models, the use of transect walks, and the use of negotiation skills. There's a whole menu. There's sort of a bag of techniques there that I tend to tap into.

The third source for me is the whole action, science, action research world. That is an important part of community design processes. The first step you take leads to the second step, and that invokes the whole incremental way in which projects are developed. There's only a certain amount of planning you can do before you need to start doing something, because then it tells you about the planning process you set in place, and the next steps you need to take rather than having it all worked out beautifully and finding when you start that some politician gets in your way. So those are my three main resources.

ZT: *How do you document projects? Do you have a project database? Do you prefer any publication outlets for disseminating information on projects?*

NH: As one of the roles that I play always when I'm doing community projects, I never leave my role as a teacher, because my feeling is that one is always working with local NGOs, the market, community-based organizations in a way that somehow leaves process behind. So the thing that I like to document at the end of the day is process and the best way of doing that is through the conventional

techniques. Well, one of them is the old manuals and guidebooks. But these are manuals and guidebooks developed by communities themselves. They have pictures of themselves in there. They can point to each other as it were. They can recognize each other. They can recognize their own places and so on. So one of the products of this process is where the community itself writes its own manual, and that's a very good way of, of course, owning the process. It's also a very good way of leaving something behind. We often get local radio programs, sometimes local television programs. If we don't have those, local NGOs make movies of each other and local videos to record their thought processes, which is important. So they are processes which are conducted, and then we might review it as outsiders, add our own instructional aspects to it. So we'll review, for example, the video, or the CD, and we'll say, "Ah, now wasn't that what you were doing there. I think that that means that. When we see a picture of you sitting around a table negotiating, I notice you're not actually eyeballing each other. You're all working around a map." That's a conflict resolution to them. They go, "Oh, yeah, that's true. That's what it was." So the video is supplemented by our own critique. What they get back at the end of the day is what I call a "piece of reflective practice". And that's a useful way of looking at the way everybody behaved and not just what everybody did.

UT & ZT: *Thank you very much for your time and support.*

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