



**THE ART OF SMALL THINGS**

By John Mack  
Harvard University Press, 2008

John Mack’s inviting new publication, *The Art of Small Things*, explores the allure and meaning of diminutive objects. This “extended ethnographic essay” follows Mack’s 2003 publication, *The Museum of the Mind: Art and Memory in World Cultures*, and, like that earlier publication, is globally expansive.

Currently professor of World Art Studies at the University of East Anglia, Mack was formerly a curator at the British Museum. He wears his vast knowledge casually, moving easily from European miniature paintings, to architectural models, Egyptian amulets, microscopic books, South African divining bowls, medieval maps, Roman gems, and Asante fertility dolls. More cautious scholars might have been reluctant to incorporate such diversity in one short volume.

Mack notes that we measure the world through our own bodies — early measurements were intimately tied to the human form, a “foot” perhaps being the only term still in common usage. He argues that the miniature is compelling both for its relationship to the scale of the body and for the perceived skill inherent in its manufacture. But size and technical prowess alone cannot account for the

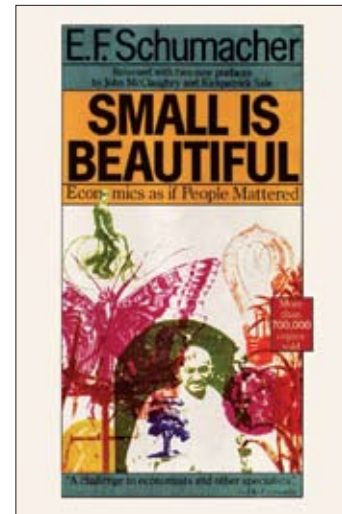
power accorded diminutive objects across many cultures. Mack suggests that “small is beautiful” because these works function as microcosms of the world. Microcosms embody the essence of the larger worlds they represent and consequently, they are proportionally more potent.

Small works are often perceived to have spiritual and talismanic qualities. Reliquaries were necessary to consecrate early Christian churches. Mack also poignantly illustrates a 10th-century silver medallion struck to commemorate the re-establishment of order in the city of Baghdad. Often designed to be carried on the body or held in the palm of one’s hand, small works of art are also inherently intimate. Queen Elizabeth I, when discovering a concealed portrait of Cecil, one of her own favorites, around the neck of a lady at court, snatched it to wear upon her shoe. By publically exposing this private token, the queen appropriated and negated its power.

*The Art of Small Things* is profusely illustrated with objects from the British Museum’s collections. Each image is annotated and, collectively, the illustrations form a secondary essay in tandem with the main text. However, Mack spends considerable time writing on objects that are not in the British Museum’s collection and are therefore not illustrated. Some of them — Joseph Cornell’s box constructions — can be conjured in the mind’s eye with ease, but other more obscure examples are harder to recall. This divergence between illustration and text can be disconcerting at times, but it also encourages multiple and non-linear readings.

Although not a miniature book itself, the volume is small — slim and slight, it fit neatly into my bag and I carried it around with me for a week, savoring each chapter as a delicious morsel.

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**SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL: ECONOMICS AS IF PEOPLE MATTERED**

By E.F. Schumacher  
Harper Perennial, 1973

One of the most influential books of the past century, *Small Is Beautiful* is simultaneously a manifesto and a mentality. Even those who have never heard of E.F. Schumacher or his little book recognize in his title an argument in favor of elegance over the tacit veneration of bigger-faster-more-more-more. Its 1973 publication thrust a counterculture mindset into a mainstream debate over what costs we as a society should and should not be willing to pay in the Faustian commitment to “growth at all costs” — a debate that has since heated up along with global temperatures.

Schumacher offers an empowering language for the point-blank critique of the continuous and limitless material exploitation of a finite world that still passes for business as usual. These are not simply shortcomings in our technical and social systems, but a metaphysical crisis. In place of the dehumanization of work in servitude to per-capita gross domestic product, Schumacher calls for a humanization of productive relationships in support of a higher quality of life. Transcending any blanket condemnation of capitalism or socialism, Schumacher’s ideas gained

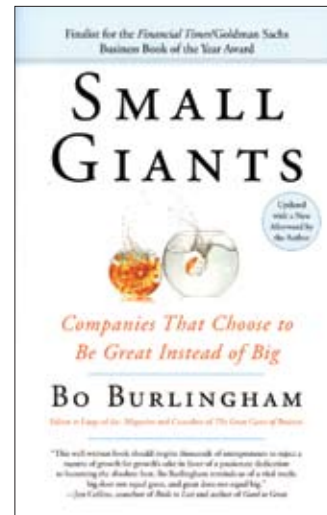
currency across the political and social spectrum from the *Harvard Business Review* to *The Whole Earth Catalog* by identifying scale itself as a key factor in the success or failure of systems. New technologies will continue to require us to revise what we consider “small,” but the essential considerations of human scale identified by Schumacher show no signs of change.

Schumacher’s controversial statements on the inevitability of energy scarcity proved prescient on the eve of the 1970s oil crisis. Moving beyond simply identifying the “logical absurdities” embedded in our systems, Schumacher provided some of the first examples of pragmatic measures intended to displace self-destructive global behaviors with local cultures of stewardship. He pioneered the notion of “intermediate” or “appropriate” technology paving the way for everything from solar ovens and mosquito-net programs to hundred-dollar laptops and microfinance.

One wonders what Schumacher, who died during a lecture tour in 1977, would have added to his already prodigious

insights on our present condition. The most significant contributors to a new metaphysics of sustainability have explicitly built on the Schumacher legacy. Notably, Schumacher’s “natural capital” is the basis of Paul Hawken’s book *Natural Capitalism*. Had Schumacher survived, he would no doubt find resonance in the novel ways in which critical thinkers such as Ulrich Beck have used the characteristics of “reflexivity” to identify self-regulating biological, technological, economic, and social systems, the key attribute of what some have postulated as a potential “second modernity.” The beauty of smallness derives from the elegance of this reflexive self-regulation. For demonstrating what it might look like to respond to the metaphysical crisis of modernity, Schumacher has earned the mantle of “godfather of sustainability.”

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**SMALL GIANTS: COMPANIES THAT CHOOSE TO BE GREAT INSTEAD OF BIG**

By Bo Burlingham  
Portfolio, 2005 (hardcover);  
Penguin, 2007 (paperback)

In today’s highly competitive business environment, the conventional wisdom is that bigger is always better. Indeed, size is often synonymous with success,

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whether measured by the number of widgets produced, people employed, or profits generated. Yet we all know that bigness does not necessarily equal greatness, and there is a sneaking suspicion that size and quality may actually be incompatible in some fundamental way. Ironically, some really great companies have failed because of their success — too much growth too fast can indeed be fatal. Yet the pressure to expand is inexorable, and it comes from many sources, including customers, suppliers, employees, and stockholders, all of whom have a vested interest in growth for growth's sake.

*Small Giants*, by Bo Burlingham, tells the stories of several companies that have survived and prospered by taking exactly the opposite tack — by deliberately staying small and focusing on their niche markets. Each is highly successful in its own right, boasting loyal customers, dedicated staff, and sustained profitability. Some of these companies deal in products, others in services. All are unique, but

they do have something in common — dubbed *mojo* by Burlingham — that makes them outstanding performers in their chosen fields. The founders tend to be people of great imagination and vision, with enormous energy and personal commitment to the business, who can motivate others to achieve a common goal. They excel at creating a special bond among their customers, suppliers, and staff, based on a strong shared value system that drives the enterprise. Not surprisingly, words like “passion,” “intimacy,” and “trust” are used liberally throughout the book. Burlingham clearly believes that business is something of an art, with spiritual as well as economic aspects.

These “small giants” are transformative in nature; they have re-conceptualized their markets and in some cases redefined whole industries. And while profitability is essential, money is not all that matters. Extraordinary customer service is key, as is “soul.” They are deeply rooted in their communities (a quality Burlingham calls

*terroir*), with an impact that transcends the bottom line:

Businesses are the building blocks, not just of an economy but of a whole way of life. What they do and how they do it have an impact that extends far beyond the economic sphere. They shape the communities we live in and the values we live by and the quality of the lives we lead. If businesses don't hold themselves to a high standard, the entire society suffers.

*Small Giants* is an enjoyable read, though a bit repetitive in spots. By telling the personal stories of the founders of these enterprises, Burlingham draws the reader right into the action; it's an effective way to get the point across. Those who believe that small is beautiful will find much comfort in Burlingham's thesis.

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