



Be Nice to the 'Creative Class'!

Academic star Richard Florida says cities must pander to flighty creative types. There goes the neighbourhood?

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Is your city tired, run down, in search of the pizzazz that attracts creative people and the wealth they churn out? Richard Florida has become the go-to guy for city builders and branders. When, earlier this summer, the University of Toronto professor of business and creativity came through Vancouver to give a talk and look around, The Tyee decided to take a close look at Florida and his controversial gospel. (See also today's companion piece, "[Talking with Richard Florida](#).")

Florida's public lectures are in high demand, and his conversational style, infused with anecdotes from his working-class Newark, New Jersey upbringing (a place he affectionately calls "Sopranos-Land") makes him palatable to those suspicious of the ivory tower. With the recent release of *Who's Your City?*, a book dedicated to helping individuals choose the city best suited to them, new converts are flocking to his message.

Creative economics

The bulk of Florida's work, which first gained popularity in 2002 with the publication of *The Rise of the Creative Class*, centres on the young, hip and creative -- a far cry from the stodgy economics of CEOs and World Bank bureaucrats. Florida contends that the economy has undergone a radical shift, greater in magnitude than the transition from an agricultural to industrial mode of production.

This new economy, as we have been told since Peter Drucker coined the term in his 1966 book *The Age of Discontinuity*, is a "knowledge economy." Unlike previous economic epochs, which were contingent on raw materials, available land or industrial infrastructure, the knowledge or creative economy is driven by people (otherwise known as "human capital"). Not just any

people, however. The ones with the greatest impact on economic development belong to an elite group of knowledge workers, a creative class of programmers, artists, musicians, doctors and lawyers, which Florida claims has become "the dominant class in society."

Now, the promotion of a book that triumphantly announces that a small class of roughly 40 million people in the U.S. has come to dominate society is a tricky thing. In essence, Florida has simply announced that there is a highly educated, mobile, wealthy overclass, which, much like transnational corporations, is not restricted by national boundaries. The creative class freely pursues career opportunities and desirable lifestyles, moving from New York to London to Hong Kong as it sees fit. Not surprisingly, these people set the pace for development and public discourse. The elite is, in fact, the elite.

Florida's work sits astride a long line of predecessors, each with a slightly different take on economics. Karl Marx warned of the alienating effects of the division of labour, which allows the elites to focus on enjoyable intellectual work while the masses toil in the fields and factories.

Like Florida, sociologist Max Weber celebrated the economic success of the United States, but chalked up the American advantage to the Protestant work ethic rather than the nation's creative edge. Thorstein Veblen's 1899 book *The Theory of the Leisure Class* portrays Florida's creatives as a parasitic breed of loafers with pretensions of refinement. Or there's *Bobos in Paradise*, a book by journalist David Brooks that calls the new upper crust "bourgeois-bohemians," a wealthy yet conscientious class with a taste for self-expression *and* success.

It's in the numbers

So what sets Florida apart from his competitors? Well, for starters, he's got data on his side. From *The Rise of the Creative Class* to *Who's Your City?*, Florida draws on extensive statistical data from a wide array of sources, including the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Census Bureau and Gallup polls. Along with his team of academic researchers, Florida compiles his data into a dizzying array of charts and graphs, making some intriguing -- and in some cases controversial -- correlations between the creative demographic and economic development.

Firstly, creative types tend to cluster wherever other creatives are. This is referred to as the "clustering force." Second of all, places that attracted those creatives in the first place tend to be diverse and tolerant, composed of a broad mix of immigrants from different cultures, bohemians and gays. As has been widely seized upon in the media, Florida's research indicates a significant correlation between large gay and lesbian populations and booming housing markets. Finally, the creative class is young and demands satisfaction. They want colourful neighbourhoods and character houses, not anonymous suburban sprawl. They want hip, quirky local businesses, not big box stores or shopping malls. They want ethnic restaurants and spontaneous street festivals filled with experimental music.

While catering to the consumption preferences of the creative elite may sound like lopsided planning, Florida claims his research shows that investment in culture and creativity leads to trickle-down benefits for all. For urban planners, *The Rise of the Creative Class* offered a number of pointers, many of them in line with the intellectual heritage of Jane Jacobs. A city should be a federation of diverse neighbourhoods, and development should conform to pre-existing local conditions. Mega-projects should be shunned in favour of small-scale grassroots initiatives. Rather than pave more roads, public funds should be re-directed into bike paths and transit infrastructure.

Pssst. Wanna buy some culture?

But Florida goes a step further than Jacobs, elevating the realm of culture to an issue of central importance. Above all, cities should ramp up their investment in the arts, in addition to improving the aesthetic appeal of each neighbourhood. Employing classic *Field of Dreams* logic, Florida believes that if you invest in culture, the creatives will come.

Promoting culture isn't exactly a divisive issue. Everyone likes culture. Compared to development strategies involving taxation, public consultation or rezoning, investment in culture is a low-impact way of improving the city. Especially in Vancouver, which can't seem to shake the nickname "No-Fun City," cultural spending is bound to improve the popularity of local government.

As a bonus for developers, a Florida makeover means increased property values, without any of the regulatory hassles. As the theory goes, once the requisite cultural infrastructure is in place, young creative-types will flock to the city, eager to start new businesses, spend their disposable incomes and hopefully bring a fresh approach to lingering problems. If you put enough creative heads together, they'll surely find a way to reduce homelessness, addiction and traffic congestion.

For all their good intentions, Florida's recommendations are highly susceptible to spin. In Vancouver, Florida-inspired ideas have led to plans to develop a "cultural precinct," while overlooking systemic issues of housing affordability and lack of workspaces for local artists. To his credit, Florida publicly denounces such strategies as misguided interpretations of his work. As he regularly cites in lectures and interviews, the director of the Andy Warhol Museum once told him that "great art was never created in a museum." Instead of investing in places to display art, Florida recommends subsidies for functional art space and working artists, who can then reinvest that money in other up-and-comers once they achieve a reasonable degree of success.

Gentrification equation?

But in order to implement such measures, planners must first overcome the widespread appropriation of creativity as a marketing tool. As anyone who has seen the condo billboards in Vancouver can attest, creativity and culture are easily packaged for consumption by developers. At the Pulse

condominiums in Vancouver's upscale Kitsilano neighbourhood, billboards and ad copy use the words "life," "style" and "culture" to attract a clientele of hip prospective homeowners. The Woodward's development sells the Downtown Eastside as "edgy" and invites you to "be bold or move to the suburbs."

As cities attempt to sell themselves as hipster havens, the diversity Florida prizes stands in danger of being washed away in a sea of expensive haircuts and Blackberries. Unfortunately, "creative" investment inevitably leads to gentrification. While revitalizing economically depressed neighbourhoods is a desirable goal, it tends to displace and exclude the very people in need of help.

At an even more fundamental level, critics have pointed out that economic development doesn't have quite the relationship with creativity that Florida claims. The two oft-cited counterexamples are New Orleans and Las Vegas. Natural disasters notwithstanding, New Orleans is diverse and creative, yet consistently ranks near the bottom for indicators of economic growth. Conversely, Las Vegas, with its low taxes and easygoing regulatory environment, continues to grow, despite the city's preference for glitzy casinos over performance art.

Moreover, premier creative cities like New York and San Francisco aren't nearly the economic powerhouses that Florida claims. For all of his insistence, the causal link between diverse, creative populations and high economic growth is far from proven. The numbers don't always add up.

Back in place

As a work of popular sociology, *The Rise of the Creative Class* was a bestselling success. But as a body of academic research, Florida's breakthrough book invites serious criticism, both for its ideological implications and its methodology. In seeking to bring the insights of the academy down to the people who need them most, Florida writes in a voice that doesn't quite satisfy either party. The result is a mishmash of cultural observations and spurious economic theory, which largely ignores the majority of the world, which lacks the resources or opportunities to cash in on the creative utopia.

Perhaps seeking a more appropriate tone, Florida's latest book drops its scholarly pretensions. The data is still there, but the ideas have disowned their university lineage. As he explains in the final chapter, *Who's Your City?* was written to be what Florida's academic colleagues disparagingly call a "self-help book." The prophet has become a televangelist.

Florida believes that there are essentially three questions that determine how happy people are with their lives: what they do, who they do it with and where they do it. It's this last question that has been overlooked for too long, and deserves to take its rightful place as "the most important decision of your life."

Not only is it important, it's also complicated.

Whereas in the past people tended to move largely because of company transfers or job opportunities, today's world sees people moving based on a whole new set of principles. Florida explains that people are now in pursuit of something more intangible than a salary increase: a place that fits with who they are.

To a certain extent, everyone wants the same thing. We would all like to live in a place where housing is affordable, where the schools are good and the streets are safe. To that end, Florida analyzes the desirability of American cities based on standard criteria, including the job market, education, safety and housing prices. But these are merely the building blocks of an outstanding city. The next level of distinction, then, relates to a city's social fabric -- how it ranks in terms of tolerance, diversity and connectivity.

Finally, there's the intangible goods that contribute to an overall sense of quality of place. Perched at the top of the pyramid of needs, these factors can be grouped in the category of aesthetics, and include physical beauty and cultural offerings. As Florida explains, aesthetics are no longer a bonus consideration, but rather play a significant role in individual satisfaction with any given location.

I'm creative, you're creative

Whereas his earlier work was aimed at those who could claim membership in the creative class, the target audience notably expands with this book. In an effort to be more inclusive, Florida redefines what he means by the creative class. It's actually not a class after all: everyone is inherently creative, whether they're a retired assembly-line worker or a 20-something gay programmer. The key to unlocking this latent creativity is location. Given the right place to live, everyone is capable of exercising their authenticity and participating in both society and the economy in creative ways. In order to help people from all walks of life find their rightful home, Florida uses five different sets of data, providing specific city rankings for singles, professionals, families with children, empty-nesters and retirees.

But before he goes on to simply recommend that you peruse the listings and relocate your life to a new, more satisfying location, Florida complicates the issue. "After writing *The Rise of the Creative Class*," he explains, "I began to suspect that in addition to the more conventional economic and sociological factors behind our decisions, there might also be psychological ones." Pause for a moment and consider this statement. People don't simply crunch numbers and then move around the continent seeking to leverage optimum conditions; there are old-fashioned feelings and personality traits to consider, too.

Florida then goes a step further, revealing that cities have their own personalities, just like individuals. Cities like Vancouver rank high on "openness to experience," a trait that translates into vibrant culture and a dynamic economy. On the other hand, old industrial cities like Pittsburgh

(Florida's hometown) are conscientious and agreeable, meaning they have traditional values and are better suited for mass production than high-tech start-ups.

The research shows that you'll be happiest if you move to a city that matches your personality. If you're neurotic, move to New York City. If you're agreeable, you might want to head down to Jackson, Mississippi.

Left behind

If Florida could stick to the self-help genre, *Who's Your City?* would be an interesting, if innocuous, read. It might give you a few ideas about where you'd like to live. The problem is, Florida can't resist commenting on the world at large, where widespread urbanization and economic polarization are having a dramatic effect on the global populace.

In contrast to the "world is flat" rhetoric of writers like Thomas Friedman, Florida sees the globalized world as a "spiky" one, with significant economic output clustering in a group of 40 mega-regions around the world. The mega-region is a lot like the Greek city-state, in which local economic, geographical and cultural ties trump any larger national allegiance. These dense clusters are measured according to the light-based regional product or LRP, an index that combines traditional economic measures with data gained from viewing satellite images of the world at night. Vancouver is located in the Cascadia mega-region, a continuously-lit swath stretching down to Medford, Oregon which produces roughly \$260 billion in LRP annually, and is home to nine million people.

This kind of data rapidly leads to depressing statistics about the concentration of the world's wealth in the hands of the few, but Florida is careful not to dwell on the downside. The top 40 mega-regions of the world are said to contain 1.5 billion people, or 23 per cent of the world's population. If you analyze those same regions in terms of economic activity, the picture becomes even more striking. The 40 mega-regions "produce 66 per cent of economic activity, 86 per cent of patented innovations, and house 83 per cent of the most-cited scientists." This leaves more than three-quarters of the world largely excluded from the centres of meaningful economic activity.

As globalization continues to expand in scope, so too will the clustering force that creates mega-regions. With mega-regions increasingly facing direct competition not only from their domestic neighbours but also from metropolises on the other side of the world (thanks to the footloose creative class), the number of mega-regions is projected to shrink. Meanwhile, the numbers of those left behind will continue to rise.

Here lies the central problem with Florida's gospel: he's preaching to the converted. Those who have the resources and the mobility to relocate on a whim don't need his help.

Rather than thinking of ways for privileged North Americans to squeeze even more satisfaction and material comfort out of life, Florida's energy would be

better spent examining how to include the 5.2 billion people living outside the mega-regions in the global economy. Such issues present mere asides for Florida, who refuses to challenge economic orthodoxy and simply reiterates the growth and progress script.

Even for those living in a highly productive mega-region, the picture isn't as rosy as it first appears. Florida explains that the most successful cities will "increasingly be inhabited by a core of wealthy and highly mobile workers leading highly privileged lives, catered to by an underclass of service workers living farther and farther away." On both an international and an urban scale, human society is becoming intensely stratified.

Why not stick around?

Despite the return to the importance of place touted throughout *Who's Your City?*, Florida speaks about being "rooted" in place as predominantly negative, a consequence of inadequate opportunity. "Staying put" is only for those who can't afford to move, or those who still hold the outmoded belief that living near friends and family is a central component of basic happiness. This begs the question of how to create healthy communities when everyone is constantly on the move in pursuit of greener pastures.

At a certain point investment in culture isn't enough -- cities require long-term, sustainable planning in order to prosper and meet the needs of *all* their inhabitants. As old-fashioned as it may be, these problems are best faced by those who have an enduring commitment to where they live, who intend to stay there and work to make things better even when conditions aren't ideal.

For all his slick pronouncements, Florida is both aware of and genuinely concerned about these lingering problems. When I spoke to him in person (you can read that interview [here](#)), he was excited to discuss the shortcomings of his work, and acknowledged that his ideas are merely the opening salvo in what must be an ongoing conversation. He is well aware of the looming energy crisis, the need for immediate innovation in sustainable development and resource use, and of the unacceptable numbers of people worldwide living in abject poverty.

The thing is, he doesn't know what to do about it.

Florida insists that his work uses the language of economic valorization because it's the only way to reach a large audience. But for the majority of readers who won't have the opportunity to speak with the author, books like *Who's Your City?* merely reiterate the blind gospel of prosperity. As a public intellectual writing about development, Florida does his readers a disservice by saving the real issues for the question and answer period.

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