

'Oh, man! Put me on the hot seat!'

Urban-life guru Richard Florida talks about mega-regions, the future of the Portrait Gallery and the reasons Ottawa can't rest on its laurels

Maria Cook

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Renowned scholar and bestselling author Richard Florida recently spoke to the Citizen at Arc The Hotel in Ottawa about his ideas and his latest book, *Who's Your City? How The Creative Economy is Making Where You Live the Most Important Decision of Your Life*.

Born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1957, Florida moved to Toronto last year to become director of the new Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management.

His breakthrough book, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*, was published in 2002. He coined the phrase "creative class" to describe knowledge workers and those whose innovative thinking drives economic growth.

He taught previously at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh and George Mason University in Washington, D.C.

Florida's wife of two years, Rana, née Kozouz, sat in on the interview. She runs Creative Class Group, the global think-tank founded by Florida. The couple live in Rosedale, an affluent neighbourhood in Toronto.

In your book you talk about mega-regions. What is Tor-Buff-Loo-Mon-Tawa?

Toronto, Buffalo, Kitchener-Waterloo and Montreal. It's about 22 million people and has an economy of more than \$530 billion. It's big, the fifth-largest mega-region in North America and the 12th largest in the world. It has great universities and it's very innovative.

How does Ottawa fit into that?

Ottawa is probably the most creative of Canada's metropolitan regions. Forty-five per cent of Ottawans are in the creative class. It scores highly on all of my 3T indicators -- technology, tolerance and talent. In many ways, it's like Washington, D.C. It has not only the government and managerial work and consultancy, but it also has this very large high-tech sector. It has a large gay and lesbian community. It has a lot of immigrants and big ethnic communities. That gives it a little bit more energy.

What's your sense of the city?

It just seems like a post-industrial knowledge-based city. It's a little bit more formal than some of these messy urban centres.

What would attract the creative class to Ottawa?

Being the capital is a big draw for talent, for consultancy, for professionals. It's a big draw for young people who are publicly minded. But I don't think Ottawa can rest on its laurels. One of the things we learned in Washington, D.C., is that there was an effort to really work on its arts and culture; massively increasing funding for the arts and setting up local theatres and trying to raid New York for artists; "Come to Washington, it's cheaper to live. We can get you space."

What's the one thing we can work on to make Ottawa better?

The biggest challenge is how do Ottawans and Torontonians and Canadians remain distinctively Canadian and not fall victim to some of the issues that have confronted the United States.

The whole homeland-security bizarrrity in the Toronto airport just made me feel like I was back in the United States; searching people for long periods of time and going through everybody's baggage.

What differences should we cultivate?

The biggest one for me is the mosaic. It allows people to keep an identity and self-express and still feel part of a system. Number two is the sense of social cohesion, although it is fraying; the eastern part of the country versus the natural-resources Alberta part.

There's the fact that your cities work.

We live in the city of Toronto. When we have kids, we can use the public schools and our friends' kids take subways to school. That is huge. In the United States if someone lives in the city, they're living in almost a gated community and sending their kids to private schools.

The flip-side is that Canada is getting more sprawled and that worries me, too.

The weakness is on entrepreneurship and commercial innovation.

Why is sprawl happening?

It's partly bad transportation decisions; building these monster highways but not investing enough in mass transit and rail.

It's affordability. The urban centre in this post-industrial knowledge-based economy is becoming very expensive because of the low time cost (time not spent commuting) and because the markets are becoming global. The Vancouver housing market and the Toronto housing market are no longer just for Canadians, there are people from all over the world.

That could advantage Ottawa. If the small- or medium-sized cities position themselves well, they could really benefit. One of the key challenges for Canada has to be how does it make the middle-size or next-tier cities great.

We were just in Hamburg, Germany, which I think would be a great model for Ottawa. It had urban and cosmopolitan and it had elegant, but it also had green. The challenge of the city of the future is to balance these; investing in arts and culture but also making sure we invest enough in our parks and green space.

What should we work on?

Canadian metros have to become models for North America. The big issue now is how to create a shared prosperity. Not just a prosperity that creates a Bill Gates or a Donald Trump. Premier (Dalton McGuinty) has asked us to do a project on the prosperity of Ontario.

One of the things we're going to work on is how to make it not only creative and

innovative and productive, but how to make it more inclusive.

Silicon Valley has the highest level of income inequality in North America. It's created tremendous wealth for people who work in technology but virtually no wealth for people who don't. One of the things Canada and its cities can do is show a way that you can have communities that don't have those levels of inequality.

Does that mean more social benefits?

Every single human being should have an inalienable right not only to social security or the right to a job, but also an inalienable right to use their full talent. The creative economy has a lot of risk and that risk has been downloaded on the individual. We have to figure out a way to mitigate that risk, so maybe we do need a higher social benefit floor. There has to be a balance; there have to be incredible incentives for people to work hard and make money.

Where do you think the Portrait Gallery of Canada should go?

Oh, man! Put me on the hot seat. This became a big debate in the United States as Washington, D.C., became very expensive. People argued we should disaggregate our government functions because it would bring benefits to other communities but also make Washington less congested.

I certainly understand a location in Ottawa and why that would be important. There's another part of me that says if those other cities really want to pay a lot of money for it and it relieves some pressure on the budget, well they should be given a shot.

What worries me is the bidding war. If it becomes like buying a professional sports team, I'm not so sure as a society we want that.

What do you do to relax and recharge your batteries?

In Toronto people work really hard -- in many ways as hard or harder than in the States. If that's indicative, we all need more work-life balance. Every chance we get, we walk in the ravine system. And we spend a lot of time with Rana's family. One of the reasons we moved here is it's only three hours from Rana's family in Michigan. Being close to family is real important.

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