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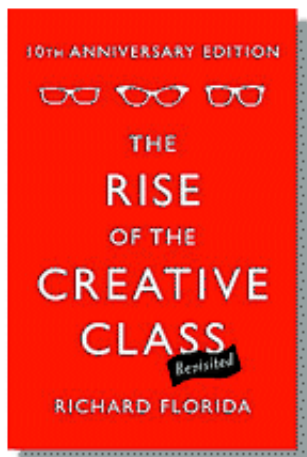
Richard Florida's creative class, 10 years later

Jon Talton: The creative class makes up about one-third of the U.S. workforce. It suffered about half the unemployment rate as the general population during the recession. The most common word on the profiles of the business social-networking site LinkedIn is "creative."



Jon Talton

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Ten years ago, an obscure professor at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh wrote a book called "The Rise of the Creative Class."

Although Richard Florida's theory was criticized, misunderstood and provoked more than a little academic jealousy, he forever shifted the lens through which we see the tectonic shifts in our economy and society.

Even with the dot-com crash, 9/11 and Great Recession, the creative class is solidly part of mainstream thought. This cohort of highly educated people in technology, science, arts and culture, media, entertainment, and knowledge-based jobs in management, health care and law that are remaking our world. This realization that analytic and social

skills are much more valuable than in the past.

The creative class makes up about one-third of the U.S. workforce. It suffered about half the unemployment rate as the general population during the recession. The most common word on the profiles of the business social-networking site LinkedIn is "creative."

Similarly, studies and experience have proved Florida right about the importance of place.

"The world is not flat, it's spiky," as he says. Cities with quality density and college towns are especially conducive to drawing and growing the creative class. So are diversity and tolerance.

The reader should be aware that I've known Florida, now a professor at the University of Toronto and New York University, for a decade and consider him a friend. Last week, I talked with him as an updated "Rise of the Creative Class" is being reissued.

When he writes about "the human capital city," he might well be thinking of Seattle. It has "the three Ts:" technology, talent and tolerance. Florida's research team ranks metro Seattle No. 4 nationally on its creativity index and No. 1 on technology, ahead of Silicon Valley.

When we spoke, Florida had been reading a New York Times article on the highly regarded computer-science department at the University of Washington. "It's really interesting," he said. "I realized 15 years ago, when I was at Carnegie Mellon, that (the UW) had a top-tier department flying under the radar."

So it is for the city and metro region.

"Seattle has quietly built a really, really interesting high-tech and entrepreneurial economy. Of course, Microsoft is a ginormous factor, but it's gone so far beyond that. Years ago, while everybody was focused on Boeing, Seattle was building this very powerful creative economy."

Boeing is still vital, of course, and supports thousands of jobs using creative-class skills. But Florida sees creativity even in Seattle retail, especially Amazon.com and Starbucks, which "is the creative space and office of the creative class."

A vibrant, quality downtown is essential.

"Amazon has obviously understood that being in a core location is a big benefit. This is something Seattle is showing the country — actually rebuilding the urban core around the creative economy. Seattle is a singular example. It positions it well for the future."

The reasons go beyond the development success in South Lake Union. Florida said, "Young people don't want to live in the suburbs. They don't want cars. They want flexible, experiential lives. This is why college towns have become beacons."

This is backed up by voluminous research, in the book and by other scholars. I see it happening every day.

But Florida, a son of the working class, never promised the rise of the creative class would be a panacea. He was trying to identify a shift as profound as the Industrial Revolution, which brought much hardship and disarray.

This is one reason I call the time we're living through the Great Disruption.

Florida sees the recession as a profound turning point, where the old "Fordism" model, with massive house building as the last big low-skill factory, using workers as a commodity and exploiting resources, hit the wall.

"The bubble was blown up as far as it could go," he said. "It will not come back." Likening our times as much to the 1870s panics and slumps as to the 1930s, Florida said it may take a generation or two to fully adjust.

"We're unequal and divided. Seattle is a microcosm of the bigger divide in our country. There's the anger of working people at the advantages and preciousness of the creative class."

While much policy is focused on saving an unsustainable old order, Florida advocates finding ways to turn low-paid service jobs into positions that are more productive and creative. "Once manufacturing jobs didn't pay well, either."

As it is, the unemployment crisis and a tougher corporate environment leave more and more workers on their own.

"We need a new social compact for support workers," Florida said.

As for Seattle, "Investment in the university is really key. It has emerged as a significant player. One big difference with Portland is that Seattle has a world-class university."

Continuing to develop downtown and quality density is critical. So is housing affordability (where Seattle still does better than most of its true peers). "Transportation issues are singularly important, especially light rail and transit," in part so low-income workers can reach employment centers.

For all his concerns, Florida sees reasons for optimism in America.

"As bad as the situation is in the U.S., as dysfunctional as Congress is, it's hard to find a place in the world that is embracing this (change) in the bottom-up way that is happening in America. I think we're going to be all right. I'm not the least bit worried about China."

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