

## Florida Focuses on the New Urban Crisis Taking Place in Many U.S. Cities

Monday keynote urges conference attendees to focus on inclusivity in their communities and devolution in their government.

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“The arc of my life has been about trying to understand the challenges that face our cities.”

So began the story told by Richard Florida, ICMA’s Monday morning conference keynoter. Florida shared the tale of his early years growing up in Newark, New Jersey, which at that time was a thriving community of vibrant, ethnic neighborhoods. As the 1950s turned into the 1960s and Newark lost a number of factories and hundreds of jobs, Florida’s family moved to the “not particularly upscale” suburb of North Arlington, New Jersey, a working-class enclave with good schools. It took nine lower- and middle-class paychecks to keep the family going.



Richard Florida

### What Happened in Newark

During a family drive through Newark one hot July day in 1967, Florida heard shots, and his father informed the family that Newark had erupted into riots. As a 10-year-old boy, he didn’t fully understand what led to the racial tensions that precipitated the riots, but he credits that day as the reason why he became an urbanist.

During a visit to New York City as a pre-law student, Florida visited various neighborhoods in the Big Apple, and he could not believe what he saw. Up until then, his idea of a city had been Newark, full of abandoned factories and aging infrastructure—the old urban crisis that resulted in white flight throughout the U.S. from the cities to the suburbs. Here now was New York City: vibrant, exciting, and the epitome of urban revival. Florida’s visit convinced him to go into the field of urban management, and he attempted to make sense of the situation through his doctoral dissertation.

### And Then. . . There Was Pittsburgh

Florida cited the example of Pittsburgh, a city whose population had once been close to a million. Pittsburgh’s economy had not just been about steel: There was Pittsburgh Paint,

Pittsburgh Glass, and other companies that eventually went out of business. The city's population declined to 330,000, and the question for city officials became: How can we restore the community to its former glory?

What they did in the city was remarkable. Built on a foundation of remarkable research and development centers, including Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh became a leading tech center. Public policy sowed the seeds of great revitalization, with Carnegie Mellon as its epicenter. Despite spinning off dozens of great local companies, however, many of the firms that started up in Pittsburgh ultimately relocated to other cities, such as Boston. Why was this happening?

The answer was surprising. Companies that had been founded in Pittsburgh moved to other cities to get access to talented, knowledgeable, motivated populations. When he returned to the students that he now taught at Carnegie Mellon's Heinz School of Public Policy and asked them why they studied in Pittsburgh but planned to relocate, the students responded that they wanted to move to a city that had energy, excitement, and a certain kind of liberating vibe. These were attributes Florida's students didn't feel Pittsburgh offered, particularly if they were female, gay, or Asian.

### **The Rise of the Creative Class**

Following extensive research, in the late 1990s Florida wrote his seminal, best-selling contribution to urban development, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. In the book, he hypothesized that the creative class, those millions of Americans who are engaged in arts, culture, and new urbanism, were essential to luring talented individuals away from the suburbs and back into the cities.

In the book, Florida discussed the "Three Ts," those characteristics that are essential to attracting and retaining a talented workforce, and in turn, urban revitalization. They include

- **Technology.** Although a necessary characteristic, outstanding universities were insufficient without the support of outstanding tech centers.
- **Talent.** Cultivating talent had become Pittsburgh's greatest export. What the city lacked was the ability and capacity to maintain and retain that talent as well as to attract new talent.
- **Tolerance.** Originally conceived as "trade," Florida's third "T" eventually focused on the importance of tolerating diverse populations.

What did the creative class want and where did they want to live? Florida encouraged conference attendees to think about the current U.S. obsession over where Amazon might locate its second major campus. It's no longer just about where a company wants to go but about where these talented individuals want to be. Florida began chronicling how the new creative class of knowledge workers spurred a new way of blending living and working.

But after moving to Toronto and watching that city's residents elect populist Rob Ford as mayor, Florida questioned how the most anti-urbanist mayor in history could have been elected in such a progressive city.

### **The New Urban Crisis. . .and What Can Be Done**

Florida realized that the creative class was doing just fine: living in upscale apartments; riding bikes to work; and building creative, successful lives for themselves. But the other two-thirds of the population were being pushed outside the city to find affordable housing and commuting an hour or more a day. The Ron Ford backlash was against the yuppie creative class and was part of a movement to "save the car" and take back the streets from the bike lanes.

What Florida had always thought of as urban revival within major cities was actually a revitalization reserved for a small, advantaged minority. In the name of revitalization, communities had increasingly begun to generate pockets of inequality, deepening segregation, and the failure of the middle class. If Rob Ford could happen in Toronto, he surmised, more and worse examples of populism would follow.

To solve this crisis, rather than embracing "winner-take-all" urbanism, in which hot shots take a disproportionate share of the urban revival pie, Florida outlined a more productive strategy based on inclusivity rather than exclusivity. That strategy, expanded in his book *The New Urban Crisis*, integrates a new kind of urbanism that is not more exclusive but more inclusive. Inclusiveness means cities become more welcoming, affordable, and attractive for ALL types of residents by shifting the narrative away from focusing solely on economics to encouraging neighborhood growth.

Florida closed with the recommendation that Americans also abandon the concept of "the imperial presidency," which worked for years in the U.S. but now places too much power into the hands of a single individual. He claimed that now is the time to make our communities great again by devolving the power invested in the presidency and moving it back to the states and more importantly to local governments.