

Is the key to Las Vegas' future bohemianism?

Richard Florida brings his three Ts to Preview 2012

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Richard Florida, author of *The Rise of the Creative Class* and intellectual entrepreneur extraordinaire, argues that if cities are to be prosperous, they must embrace the “three Ts”: talent, technology and tolerance. This isn’t a groundbreaking argument, but he adds a seductive twist: To capture these three Ts, we must also embrace bohemianism.

To have a cubicle army, Florida might say, we must have Foster the People for their earbuds.

Florida, director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto, is constantly name-checked in the media, I suspect in part because he offers an especially appealing argument for journalists, since many of us view ourselves as part

Richard Florida says Vegas needs talent, technology and tolerance to thrive.

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of this “creative class.” (The reality is less glamorous—a shocking number of journalists can’t write at all, and in high school they weren’t bohemians; they were gossips.)

Even though I’m skeptical of the flash and the buzzwords, Florida—in town February 9 for the Chamber of Commerce Preview Las Vegas 2012—has some valuable stuff to tell us. Last year he named Downtown Las Vegas one of the top 10 up-and-coming urban neighborhoods.

First, though, let's turn to his tough-love observations.

In a March 2009 piece in *The Atlantic*, he noted that Las Vegas was far too dependent on construction and development as an economic growth model and would suffer years of stagnation: "Yet the boom itself neither followed nor resulted in the development of sustainable, scalable, highly productive industries or services. It was fueled and funded by housing, and housing was its primary product. Whole cities and metro regions became giant Ponzi schemes."

He was mostly right. (The Las Vegas Strip is indisputably an awesome economic engine, but it was not enough to sustain us once the crash came.)

"These construction jobs," he said in an email, "will not come back for a long time. That's why I'm visiting Las Vegas, to make the case for economic diversity; a new model of growth with a sustainable center; and upgrading service jobs."

Luckily, our Downtown warriors are trying to build something that will bring those three Ts.

Ideally, once online retailer Zappos moves into the old city hall, a cluster of technology companies and firms that support them will follow.

A recent *New York Times* story and follow-up column by Princeton economist Paul Krugman showed why clustering is so important: "The advantages of industrial clusters—in which producers, specialized suppliers, and workers huddle together to their mutual benefit—have been a running theme since the 19th century." The Las Vegas Strip is a perfect example of an economic cluster, but we need more of them, and Downtown is ripe to become one. I'm not certain, however, that a few hipster bars on East Fremont will get it done.

In a review of Florida's *Creative Class*, Harvard economist Edward Glaeser offered praise but also examined the data and concluded: "Mayors are better served by focusing on the basic commodities desired by those with skills, than by thinking that there is a quick fix involved in creating a funky, hip, Bohemian downtown."

What basic commodities? Good schools, low crime and access to inexpensive large lots with single-family homes. (Sorry, but creative people have kids, and then a lot of them want to live in the 'burbs.) Do we provide these commodities? The record is decidedly mixed.

I asked Florida about this: "Quality of place matters. This includes the basic needs that Glaeser points out but also amenities that create an authentic culture and feel."

He points to the Gallup Soul of the Community, a massive survey of tens of thousands of Americans, in which two factors emerged as central to well-being and happiness in a community: Openness to diversity; and quality of place, which included basics like good schools but also environmental quality, parks, historic structures, cultural offerings and street-level culture.

I buy it. Still, before we get all giddy on booster fumes, let's be at least a little skeptical: There are tens of thousands of unemployed construction workers who know all too well the cost of our previous delusions.

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