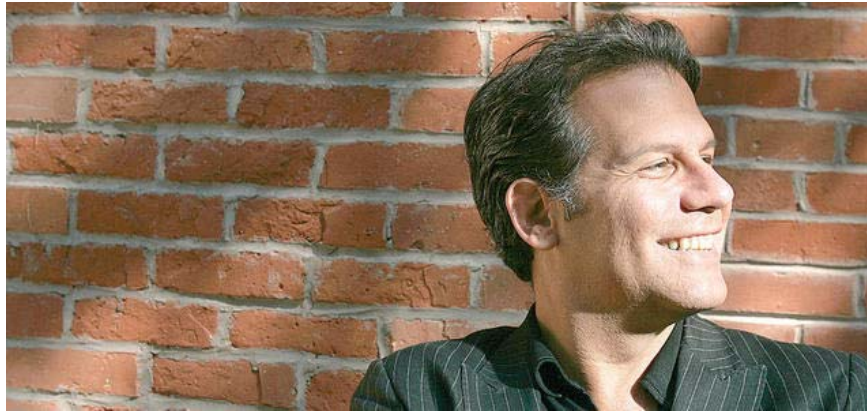


EYE WEEKLY.COM

FEATURES



Richard Florida

BY MARC WEISBLOTT April 09, 2008 14:04



"When we moved from DC to Toronto, we were amazed by how polite people are, that cars stop for pedestrians who raise their voice or blow their horn."

That's not a testimonial from the next Toronto Unlimited tourism campaign — it's an aside from Richard Florida in his new book *Who's Your City? Economy is Making Where You Live the Most Important Decision of Your Life*.

With it, the public intellectual is leveraging his reputation as a social scientist, closely associated with coining the terms "Creative Class" and "Bohemia 2.0" — closer to the self-help section. In the process, he's been boosting the self-esteem of many highly placed Torontonians: his thesis says that your neighbourhood, and, while writing the book, he decided the neighbours he desired were... us!

Being recruited to run the new Prosperity Institute at the Rotman School of Management — with an office under construction in the MaRS Discovery Centre — probably an incentive, too, with \$120 million dedicated to the urban studies think tank — and Professor Florida's wattage.

He gained prominence by extolling the worth of certain subcultures — a measure called the Bohemian Index gave credit to starving artists for giving their neighbourhoods raising its economic fortunes by drawing high-tech industries).

Can the quality of people moving to a new town validate the most eccentric residents? Florida will show you the money, and the data, along with anecdotal evidence that it does. Consider development on Queen Street West. It's a perfect example of how a once-beleaguered area can prosper — and the condos that followed the bohemian renaissance have names like "Bohemian Embassy."

That seems like the kind of fusion Richard Florida has in mind. Not too terrible so long as gentrification doesn't scare all the artists away. But why?

The stages given to Florida provide a clue that it isn't eclectic artists: The *Globe and Mail* heralded the arrival of the 50-year-old Newark, New Jersey academic career flourished in Pittsburgh before he spent the last few years in Washington, DC — by giving him a curious amount of ink. Not only opinion columns under his byline, but taking him on walking tours around downtown Toronto to think?

Kensington Market: "There's now a whole generation of Americans who've never seen a neighbourhood like this." Yonge and Dundas: "What I think is missing, even though it's not my aesthetic, is that it's being used." University of Toronto: "You have an urban university a couple of kilometres from the core, accessible on foot, by subway, by mass transit, in a real neighbourhood with functioning shops and residences where people live, work, learn and play." Noticing, Rich.

Florida's first major local address, after moving here with wife Rana last fall, was at the Toronto Board of Trade's dinner in January. The message was simple: We. Are. All. Creative.

Tom Cruise's motivational speaking character in *Magnolia* — let alone Cruise in that Scientology indoctrination video — couldn't have put it more eloquently: If you have projects comparable charisma, he's not looking for an argument, though he frequently alludes to televangelist types taking issue with his two Crises of Faith documentaries that wherever gay people like to fornicate, knowledge workers are sure to follow.

Who's Your City? was spawned in response to a book by New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman — a DC neighbour of Florida's — who postulates that technology means home is near-irrelevant in *The World Is Flat*. Florida's own retort: "The world is actually very spiky" (backed up by staid academic research).

Which brought local devotees to the Rotman School of Management April 3 to hear him launch the book — another chance for Florida to tell how he got from his background to academic stardom. In doing so, he outgrew his home base: the location of Carnegie Mellon University, where he taught for 17 years. Florida's existence — his personality was no longer Pittsburgh.

Toronto isn't so much serving Florida's sense of place as much the "mega-region" we belong to is (one of 40 identified). Did you know we've been what he's branded "Tor-Buff-Chester"?

Florida might be assertive, but he's not especially arrogant — he's articulating his enthusiasm. Take a shot at his Toronto cheerleading, and he'll and earnestly respond on his Creative Class blog (www.creativeclass.typepad.com), where the EYE WEEKLY Scrolling Eye reviews of his Toronto recurring "zingers."

"Just imagine if Jane Jacobs blogged," said Florida after his Board of Trade dinner speech. "Imagine if Karl Marx blogged, imagine if Leonardo da Vinci blogged. How valuable would it be to have a record of their thoughts, to read the evolution of their thoughts?"

And he aims to be accessible not just in his Web 2.0 approach, but in his subject matter. Though the prose isn't going to be mistaken for Lester Kinsler, musical taste informs Florida's sense of place. He enthuses about a colleague who used iTunes playlists to gauge personality types, and plans to include it in a forthcoming book on alt-rock scenes. *Who's Your City?* uses Jack White of the White Stripes moving to Nashville from Detroit as an example of his place.

And the first wave of publicity for the book stateside focused on the "singles map" of America, which gave the girlie media something to chew on. It's not that there aren't enough single guys in New York might as well be quoted on the movie poster for *Sex and the City*.

But he isn't all pop. When the audience is more interested in wealth management, like at the Rotman book launch, Florida tailors his spiel for the empty nesters who are also the relocating kind. It's this kind of focus on economic opportunities for big industry and government — the reduction of the unemployment indicator like housing starts — that leads critics to wonder how bohemian the message is.

Florida protégé Elizabeth Currid, a 29-year-old University of Southern California professor and author of *The Warhol Economy*, has nothing but praise for Florida's Class guru's demographic versatility. "Just because he's not the lead singer in a rock band doesn't mean he can't send a message about a city by accepting place because it accepts that kind of performer," she says. "I don't think he has to be a bohemian to understand what bohemia is about."

"If you want to seriously research an issue like poverty, you don't go to impoverished people, you go to the policy makers and foundations that are making things happen."

But from the perspective of those who've savoured the city coming into its own, counterculturally speaking — to become a city where the Creative Class rather stay than leave — this Globe-approved Music Man might well be trying to sell us a new monorail.

Max Allen, the CBC Radio producer, Textile Museum co-founder, and close friend and collaborator of Jane Jacobs (they both moved here from the States and were neighbours until her passing in 2006) didn't need a city self-help book 40 years ago, and doesn't want it now. "Florida's idea that artist-led development is the wave of the future seems to me to be too narrow," he says. "A lot of other jobs matter, too. And my sense of Richard Florida is that he just caricatures it. Alana Wilcox, co-editor of the *uTopia* book series for Coach House Press — bona fide bohemia a stone's throw from the Rotman School — is a slight assessment of his motivation. "He's talking about creativity to people who never thought of creativity as anything positive," she says. "That created a certain way even if that stuff has always been so obvious to me."

"Maybe it's going to take him to explain it to a group of people who otherwise wouldn't have wanted to listen? And why didn't anyone think of it that way? The vision from those who came of age with a sense of Toronto, perhaps, compared to an American moving in midlife?"

Jane Jacobs is frequently praised by Florida, who thinks her greatest insight concerned the clustering of people, and their creativity, on economic corridors. "She followed in her footsteps by relocating here around age 50."

But Allen objects to a reading of Florida as Jacobs' intellectual heir. "Toronto back [in the late '60s] had as much in common with what it is now as a shelf. Jane had observations — not charts and graphs. Do you point to Toronto, and tell people in Medicine Hat that's their ideal? How exactly do our Cities don't operate by recipes."

Yet who's going to resist a slick academic with a global reputation, hitting the stateside media circuit for *Who's Your City?* and telling everyone he's from 416 was Richard Florida's home.

"He looks like a million bucks so that probably helps," says Allen. "But I lived here for 30 years before I dared say anything about this place."

Email us at: LETTERS@EYEWEEKLY.COM or send your questions to EYEWEEKLY.COM
625 Church St, 6th Floor, Toronto M4Y 2G1