

THE VARSITY

Toronto's creative capitalism

Urban guru Richard Florida probes the line between artistic communities and economic powerhouses, and tells CHANDLER LEVACK about our city's future

Chandler Levack 29/01/08



Dan Epstein

In Richard Florida's mind, Toronto at its best is a tangle of immigrants, gay

men, and a free-flowing intellectual-based economy. Who is this man, and why should we trust him?

He's the hottest new intellectual property to come to Rotman, a Globe and Mail columnist, and get this: an American. Florida grew up in the kind of New Jersey town where "if you were smart, you had to hide it or you'd get your ass kicked." His father, a steel worker, privately yearned to take over his sister's hair salon, but was held back by the taboos of his social class. Aspiring to rock stardom but out of ideas, Florida went to nearby Rutgers to study business. After the '60s idealism faded away, he found solace in the world of academia—even if it meant cutting off the ponytail. Over an eight-year stint at Columbia finishing his PhD in economics, Florida cultivated his theory of the creative class: a renegade philosophy mixing Jane Jacobs' systems of urban survival, hard-edged data on bourgeois-bohemian lifestyles, and a sprinkle of John Stuart Mill-esque "greatest happiness" utilitarianism for good measure.

As the information age evolves, more workers enter what Florida calls the "creative class," pursuing careers that take more mind than muscles. The cultivation of such individuals drastically impacts the communities where they live. Witness the death of onceprosperous factory cities like Cleveland and Detroit, and the birth of coastal artistic communities like Portland and Seattle. As great minds enter, rental prices rise and neighbourhoods gentrify along a scale Florida indexes according to bohemian, homosexual and diversity quotients. For lovers of a good café and interpretative performance art, this is all well and good, but Florida's 2002 book *Rise of the Creative Class* caused uproar among old-school economists: becoming the poster child for promoting a talented, tolerant, atypical America.

I've just always been me," says Florida in defence. "One of the things that happened in the '60s was an emerging creative economy, and it was like a giant temper-tantrum. Whether that was the beatniks, or the early rock musicians—Keith Richards, Jimi Hendrix, John Coltrane—they probably couldn't express themselves and they wanted to be creative. It's all about art and identity, so they just started to use drugs and do very destructive things because they couldn't be themselves."

"Well I went through that too. When I got my PhD, there were certain things you were not allowed to discuss." Florida recalls Harvard economic professor Richard Caves revealing, "I didn't write my book about creative industries until I retired because people wouldn't take me seriously."

Florida realized that to be true to himself, theory should reflect what he was observing. "So I said, fuck it, sorry, said screw it, I'm just gonna do this. I changed my whole research agenda at the time and wrote *Rise of the Creative Class*."

Florida is a city-centrist, obsessed with the idea of flourishing culture in deep pockets of "messy urbanism." He was amazed—and impressed— at the

survival of Toronto's one-of-a-kind neighborhoods like schizophrenic Kensington Market, where teenagers flit past Mom-and-Pop storefronts on their way to buy bongos from head shops, passing yuppies in mid-quibble over which brie to feature at their next dinner party in Rosedale—the Toronto neighborhood that Florida, for now, calls home.

City politicians like talking about joining the elite club of world-class cities like New York, London, and Paris, but Florida says Toronto needs to set an example, not follow them.

“I'm trying to learn a lot about Canadian identity, about being in the shadow—and I say this with all humility—of the United States. I think Toronto's in a crisis, which happens when a city becomes really important, but it doesn't yet realize it. It's like ‘Oh my God, now we are a world city.’”

“I told the mayor you can't only think about making Toronto better. Toronto has to become an example for the world. It now has an obligation not only to become a great city for itself, but by God, so many cities in my country, America, need an example to be better cities.”

“It's not perfect. It has warts. But I'm trying to say to a global audience: look at this model of a more equitable city, a mosaic city, and a city that treats immigrants fairly. That's less violent. Toronto has to, in a way, grow up and show the world what it can be. It has to say, no no, what we're doing is important and it's good. What I've found is that people here either call you a booster, a brown-noser, or, I guess the other thing is that you're a critic. And there doesn't seem to be an in-between.”

The rapid gentrification of Parkdale has been a central concern ever since the Starbucks at Queen and Dovercourt was lovingly brandished with a spray-painted “Drake, you ho.” As big business pushes into a creative environment, it pushes the real artists to the fringes of affordable neighbourhoods.

“One of the things Toronto has to worry about is that if they want to keep this dense creative energy going, and not be spread out (like Brooklyn), it has to be really proactive now. The most remarkable thing Jane Jacobs said to me about gentrification was, “Look, it's simple, when a place is boring, even the rich people leave.” Toronto has all these neighborhoods with forms of different energy and kinds of people, and that's one of the things that makes Toronto great [...] this edginess and messiness is what's phenomenal.”

“I know a lot of people who said ‘I lived in New York when it was dangerous,’ and I think what they were saying is that they lived in a city that was actually a challenging idea of spaces and architecture and diversity—it's not like they wanted to get mugged, nobody wants to get physically beaten up. But Toronto is very physically and demographically different, and you all have these things that are bleeding together, Pottery Barns next to falafel stands [...] but I'm actually okay with that. It's when everything becomes homogenous, that's when I think you lose.”

Adds Florida, "Every single human being is creative. It's not about attracting the yuppies, the gentrifiers, the hipsters, it's about harnessing the creative energy of every single human being, and that's what my books are about." The global village of London, New York, Paris and Toronto share a lot more in common than inhabitants across one country. Things are changing, and while its good for latte-lovers, it changes the way we walk—and view—the streets

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