



Few minutes with ...  
Richard Florida

February 24, 2008

Richard Florida became rich and famous in 2002 when he wrote "The Rise of the Creative Class," his mega-seller that contends that cities like San Francisco and Boston have prospered in part by attracting disproportionate numbers of scientists, engineers, architects, educators, writers, artists and entertainers who are seeking friendly, lively, interesting and socially tolerant places to live.

"Who's Your City?" -- which hits bookstores March 19 -- explains why the city you choose to live in plays such an important role in determining your career, your friends and your ability to lead a happy, fulfilled life. Florida, who left Carnegie Mellon University after 17 years in 2004 is now a professor of business and creativity at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, offers lots of data and a 10-step guide to the 40 million Americans who move each year. I spoke with him by phone Tuesday from Miami, where he was visiting.

Q: What's the key message of your new book and who did you write it for?

A: I'm a working class kid. My father worked in a factory. He told me, "Rich, study hard. You don't want to work in a factory like Dad. Get a good education, get a good job. That's going to be the key to your success in life." My mother said, "Your Dad's a really smart guy. I love him to death ... I could have married these more successful guys who I went to high school with. But I picked him. Picking the right spouse or life partner is key to your happiness."

What my parents never told me, and what I've learned in 25 years of research, including all the years I spent in Pittsburgh at Carnegie Mellon University, is that there are three legs of the triangle -- the job and career you take; the family and loved ones that surround you; and where you live.

I wrote this book for young people graduating college, for young families having children, for empty-nesters whose kids are leaving the house, to say to them, "You owe it to yourself to think a little bit harder and a little bit more systematically about the place you choose to live -- and make the best possible decision you can."

Q: Why is where you choose to live more important today than it was 30 or 40 years ago?

A: My earlier work and my ongoing research forced me to confront this fact, this irony: At the time when'd you believe that advances in transportation and communications technology -- the telephone, the Internet, the personal computer, the wireless revolution -- would flatten the world and make it just as easy to telecommute to work or

basically live wherever you want and plug-and-play into the global economy, we're confronted by the fact that about 60 percent of all of the world's economic activity and more than 90 percent of the world's innovations occur in about 25 mega-regions -- for example, the Boston-Washington-New York corridor and the great corridor that goes from Chicago to Pittsburgh. So we were confronted by the fact that place remains an incredibly important economic unit.

What I said in the book is that there are two things going on at the same time. On one hand, the world is becoming flatter, as Tom Friedman of the New York Times suggests. More places can play. But the way we are globalizing is through these "spiky" places. The world is also becoming spiky and more clustered.... Certain urban locations are more important. Just to make this simple: It's not like China and India are our competitors in the United States. Our competitors are really Shanghai and Bangalore. So when we look at the world we have to look at the cities or mega-regions that are competing, not just the countries.

Q: You say it's easier than ever to exercise our geographic choice. How do we make that choice -- what are some of the things we should be looking for at different times of our lives?

A: The book includes a chapter called "The Mobile and the Rooted." What I say is that we really have to confront this. For many people, staying in the place they live and around loved ones and in the community they grew up in is incredibly important. Many people choose to stay. But what I say is that if we look at what we used to call "upward mobility," "socioeconomic mobility," increasingly the ability to achieve socioeconomic mobility turns on geographic mobility, because economic opportunities are more specialized and more clustered.

Q: You say Pittsburgh is the best buy for retirees. Is that a plus for Pittsburgh or a minus?

A: I think Pittsburgh is well-positioned if it would take advantage of its assets. One is that it's part of the third largest mega-region in the world. You have "Greater Tokyo," you have the "Bos-Wash Corridor," you have the "Chi-Pitts Corridor." There are only three mega-regions with about \$2 trillion in economic activity -- and Pittsburgh is part of one of them. The second thing is that Pittsburgh is right next to the Bos-Wash Corridor -- the second-largest mega-region after Tokyo.

So, oh my God, here's Pittsburgh in this incredible location. I think as those two mega-regions grow, they will begin to envelop Pittsburgh. As the book points out, although most people think retirees want to go to the sun and fun, for these baby-boomer retirees who want a more active lifestyle, who want a little bit more culture, who want to be around great universities for lifelong learning -- it struck us right away in our analysis that Pittsburgh is right up there as one of the best buys and one of the best places for them to live.

Pittsburgh has the right location. It has the right long-run assets -- these fabulous universities and health complexes, great arts and cultural institutions, great historical architecture and a beautiful natural setting. The question is, can the leadership of the community, broadly based, recognize what its real assets are and act on them?

Pittsburgh in many respects is a smaller version of Toronto. What I've seen in Toronto -- a place that is much colder than Pittsburgh and has a much more arduous winter -- has become one of the most vibrant cities in the world by encouraging immigration, by encouraging cultural vibrancy, by encouraging entrepreneurship and tech start-ups, by encouraging a great sense of place and citizen energy. If Toronto can do it at that scale, Pittsburgh can certainly do it at a smaller scale. It has all the elements to succeed and the question is when.

Q: Is there a single most important caution you can offer to people who deliberately choose where they are going to move?

A: Lots of people follow the fashion, whether that's the newest pair of blue jeans, the newest hairstyle or the newest city style. What the book says, and I think this is a growth from the "Rise of the Creative Class," is you have to be wary of that. ... I think a lot of people make these decisions intuitively. What this book tries to do is say: "You can be a little bit smarter than your intuition. Your intuition is giving you a lot of hunches that are right -- go with it. But just be a little bit more systematic. Pick a couple places to look at. Go take a look at a location calculator like Bert Sperling's fantastic "Best Places <<http://www.bestplaces.net/>> " calculator. Get a list of 10 places. First of all, if your place isn't on there -- whoa! But do a systematic comparison of three or five of them.

Nobody ever told me -- a quote-unquote "expert" -- that place was important. And what we've come to find is that place is one of these three big life decisions. If the book can push the role of place up in this conversation about what is important to our lives, I think it will have done its service. That's the goal of the book -- to simply insert place into this ongoing conversation about what's important -- not just as an economic category, not just as a sociological category, but what's important to real people's lives.

---

Author's Excerpt  
Government dining

New York Times Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter David Cay Johnston's latest book focuses on what we at the Trib like to call "wealthfare" -- the dishing out of government subsidies and special legal, regulatory or tax deals to politically favored corporations or wealthy individuals. Sometimes, as Johnston points out in detail, it's a \$100 million gift of taxpayer money to sainted multibillionaire Warren Buffet. Sometimes it's a local sales tax to benefit the baseball stadium-building aspirations of then-Texas Rangers part-owner George W. Bush. Sometimes it's the city of Toledo abusing its eminent domain powers to take homeowners' properties and give them to Chrysler. Though Johnston's book genuflects to Adam Smith and Andrew Mellon, it is no free-marketeer's manifesto. In fact, in his New York Times review, New Republic magazine senior editor Jonathan Chait -- a liberal -- criticized "Free Lunch" for its "left-wing populist" tone and for having an "unmistakably Naderite" style and worldview. Johnston, a registered Republican, countered in a letter to his own newspaper that Chait mischaracterized his politics and misrepresented his opinion of

market capitalism, which Johnston says has been perverted to benefit the rich. We asked Johnston to select an excerpt of his book:

Real economic growth, after all, requires a society of industrious people who labor, save, invest, and take risks in search of economic reward. Those who succeed deserve the fruits of their labors.

But the distribution of income in a society does not take place in a vacuum. It is also the product of government rules. And those rules were written by people, not handed down from some immutable power. ...

Without even touching money, government can cause huge transfers of wealth within the economy. For example, the Big Four commercial sports leagues are exempted from the laws of competition, allowing them to charge higher admission prices than they could get in a free market. Movie theaters and video arcades enjoy no such protection from competition for the limited amounts people can spend on entertainment. ...

Rewriting the economic rules that define our society in the past few decades has been done under the banner of "deregulation" and its promise that less government means more economic growth. The term itself is a misnomer. No society is free of regulation. Everything has rules, everything. Baseball's rules go right down to how many stitches are on the ball (104). ...

We do not live in a laissez-faire economy in which there is no interference from government and people are allowed to do as they please, operating the economy by making contracts with one another. We have rules. Over the past three decades the rules affecting who wins and who loses economically have been quietly and subtly rewritten.

The richest Americans and the corporations they control shaped and often wrote these new rules and regulations under which our economy now functions. The rich and their lobbyists have taken control of the levers of power in Washington and the state capitals while remaking the rules in their own interests.

A Page of Books, written and compiled by Bill Steigerwald, appears on the last Sunday of each month.

Bill Steigerwald can be reached at [bsteigerwald@tribweb.com](mailto:bsteigerwald@tribweb.com) or 412-320-7983.

Back to headlines <javascript:history.back()>