

Choosing your neighbourhood

IN PERSON / Defining prosperity according to Richard Florida

Matt Mills / Xtra / Thursday, March 13, 2008

Richard Florida made a splash in 2003 with his book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. In it he wrote about what gay and lesbian people have known for years: that when we move in, property values go up. More precisely, Florida says that gay population is a dependable indicator of a city's capacity to attract and retain world-class workers and thinkers. Last year he moved to Toronto to become director of the Centre for Jurisdictional Advantage and Prosperity and professor of business and creativity at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. He spoke with Xtra on Feb 29. The below is an edited transcript of our conversation.

Matt Mills: I'd like to talk about your use of the Gay Index in the *Rise of the Creative Class*. You use that index as a premise for the rest of the work in that book. You didn't really write, because it wasn't necessary, extensively about the gay index but you did take a great deal of criticism from social conservatives for latching onto it.

Richard Florida: I learned something really fundamental from that criticism. No straight, white, middle-aged, mainstream man can understand this unless they've been through it. When you sit there and people accuse you of having a gay agenda and try to say that all the work you've done for more than two decades is all about this gay agenda, you begin to realize what people say if you had a black agenda or a woman's agenda or an XYZ agenda.

For me *The Rise of The Creative Class* was a way of me coming out intellectually. I said to myself, "Screw 'em. I'm going to do this. I don't care what they throw at me. I'm not going to back down."

It was an incredibly intellectually empowering moment for me because I could see exactly what these people are trying to do.

Mills: Do you think, being in Canada now yourself, you are freer or feel more comfortable to say things publicly that you wouldn't otherwise say if you were living and working entirely in the US?

Florida: Certainly I felt that in the United States your ability to speak openly was to some degree constrained. I remember reading a book by the great political scientist Charles Lindblom. He wrote it toward the end of his career. He's the father of the theory of incrementalism; that we muddle through when we make decisions that we don't make them rationally with all information. He said one of the things he thought about being a professor in America is that he never confronted, until late in his career, the fundamental questions of power and economic influence because they were just off the agenda. It wasn't that he wasn't allowed to talk about them, they never made their way onto the agenda. He thought that was really a problem for the country's discourse.

I certainly feel that living in a smaller country in a multinational city that I can speak more openly, or maybe I'm encouraged to talk more openly about the world, so I don't worry so much and I think in my future work you will see this reflected.

Mills: It's become progressively more difficult to afford to live in the Church and Wellesley neighbourhood. I see over time fewer and fewer young people who are coming here to live. We're also seeing a diffusion of gay people across the city more openly, which is wonderful.

We're also seeing resentment of the neighbourhood. People are partying outside the Church and Wellesley neighbourhood and in the mainstream press gay writers are writing about how the Church and Wellesley neighbourhood is dying. Empirically it's just not the case. It's more expensive to live here than it has been before. The competition for retail space is more serious than it ever has been. There are more street festivals than there ever have been. As a gay man I'm finding it more and more difficult to be able to afford to live here but at the same time I feel a very, very deep attachment to the neighbourhood because I feel more comfortable here. Obviously my job is here and my career is here.

What's happening there?

Florida: As a straight man with no direct experience in Church and Wellesley I can only offer my interpretations.

First, I asked Jane Jacobs this exact question about the Annex and Toronto's downtown core and New York and San Francisco because in my second book, *Flight of the Creative Class*, we found that precisely in these creative meccas — high levels of gay and lesbian population, high artistic quotient, lots of innovation — that housing values were going through the roof and people we getting priced-out. She looked at me in her Jane Jacobs way

and she said, "Well Richard, when a place gets boring even the rich people leave."

Her point was that this is a natural cycle.

The gay and lesbian community was very good at finding really beautiful aesthetic prime-located neighbourhoods. I guess because capitalism forgot them at the time. Those are precisely the neighbourhoods that have become so valuable in the knowledge-driven creative age because they're central, because you don't have a big commuting hassle, because they're in the dense core, because they're near universities.

In a sense it was the gay aesthetic, the gay sensibility that kind of triggered the resurgence of these spaces. Now they've become incredibly valuable and real estate developers have descended upon them, not just in Toronto but all over the world.

My own hunch is that housing affordability has become a big, big issue for any city that wants to remain creative. When Jane wrote about Toronto, she wanted to protect Toronto from the heavy hand of government urban planners. Now, I don't want to say it's the reverse, but now those neighbourhoods have become valuable again so it's the market that's reshaping them, not the heavy hand of government planners. That's going to take a very, very different kind of strategy.

How do you deal with a city that has become so big and exciting and so thrilling and traffic-clogged that everyone and his brother wants to live in these neighbourhoods that were gay artistic and bohemian neighbourhoods? How do we avoid a place becoming so boring and every-one clearing out because it's not exciting anymore?

I think that's the tipping point we're at in Toronto and I'm hoping that's the conversation the community can have. It's not the government that's the problem anymore; it's really the market working so effectively that it's making the neighbourhoods incredibly valuable for new real estate developers.

One thing that's good about Toronto is that people are willing to talk about this stuff and hopefully take action on it. I think Toronto needs a new development model and it's one that's going to have higher density and will have to deal with the affordable housing issue and it can't simply be this old stalemate between I'm going to protect my neighbourhood against anything. It's not going to work because you're not protecting it against the heavy hand of government you're protecting it against very nimble real estate development and market forces. We need a big rethink about this. It's not for me to prescribe that and this has to come from an evolving community conversation.

I think there are three or four places in the world to have this conversation. We were just in Copenhagen. I think this conversation is happening in Northern Europe and Scandinavia. I think it's happening in parts of Australia and New Zealand, Sydney and Brisbane that are dealing with this. And I think it's happening here.

Richard Florida's new book, [Who's Your City: How the Creative Economy is Making Where You Live the Most Important Decision of Your Life](#), is due out in March.

Visit [Xtra.ca](#) to hear a podcast of the complete interview including Florida's comments on free expression, the war in Afghanistan and his colleagues' ongoing research into gay neighbourhoods.