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The City as Modern Muse

Richard Florida Muses on Cultivating Washington's 'Creative Class'

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On a mid-morning in early August, Richard Florida -- theoretician du jour about what makes cities succeed -- wouldn't stop staring at the rows of bungalows speeding past his car window in the city's Brookland area.

"This is a really lovely neighborhood. This is a real neighborhood. I know when people hear the term 'Northeast' what they think," he said. "This is remarkable. The typical advantaged person doesn't know this exists."

With Florida riding shotgun, his assistant steered his seven-year-old Land Rover toward Prince George's County. The author of the best-selling "The Rise of the Creative Class" has become increasingly influential with local development officials since moving here from Pittsburgh two years ago for a post at George Mason University.

In Prince George's, his work -- which argues that cities that attract highly educated "creative class" workers fare better economically -- was considered "validation" for the Gateway Arts District, a public initiative to revive the Route One corridor. The Greater Washington Initiative last week began running ads that cast Washington as a creative-class hub. In Fairfax, economic development officials are working on a summit on creative economies and how businesses in the region can attract a creative workforce.

Florida approves of such talk. His criticism of Washington is that not enough of its residents think of themselves as living in a creative, dynamic place, worthy of cutting-edge architecture and other traits of a world capital.

"People in these communities think they're part of a different region and they're not," he said. "This is a global center. It's one of the 10 most important economic regions in the world, a place approaching the influence of a London, and to not think about it that way is tragic."

But what about Hyattsville?

The small, inner-Beltway city was not looking like part of a world capital when Florida saw it in August, invited by a reporter to tour the region and discuss how his theories apply in different neighborhoods. He hasn't done much touring yet, between travels and lecture and consulting and teaching. He's still at that introductory stage, where a casual glance of a Hogs on the Hill restaurant on Bladensburg Road in Northeast Washington provokes delight.

"Boy, that place looks fabulous."

Upon arriving in Hyattsville, he paused in front of a laundromat along Route One. Through the window, a man inside motioned him to move his car along.

"He thinks we're coming to transform the neighborhood. 'Get out.' Great," Florida said.

Stepping onto the sidewalk, Florida surveyed a series of billboards advertising town homes starting in the \$300,000s. The signs depicted a tidy, middle-class community scheduled to take the place of empty lots. Local officials envision a potpourri of artists and families and professionals inhabiting a vibrant new neighborhood.

Florida wondered.

"It looks like an attempt to recreate an urban fabric," he said. But, "can you really build something new that has those organic neighborhood qualities? That's a big open question."

"People don't want to live in something prefab, especially since we've all left family behind," he said later. "We want to go somewhere real, to be part of something bigger than us. Value comes from authentic-ness."

Creative-class types, after all, value authenticity. They prefer "streets lined with a multitude of small venues" such as coffee shops, restaurants and bars with live performances and exhibits, art galleries and bookstores, which set the stage for overlapping social scenes, Florida writes in "The Rise of the Creative Class."

For members of the creative class, "this kind of 'scene of scenes' provides another set of visual and aural cues they look for in a place to live and work," he writes. "You may not paint, write or play music, yet if you are at an art-show opening or in a nightspot where you can mingle and talk with artists and aficionados, you might be more creatively stimulated than if you merely walked into a museum or concert hall, were handed a program, and proceeded to spectate."

"I believe people are creative. Creative people are not just knowledge workers," he said, standing at the counter at Franklin's, a Hyattsville restaurant, waiting for a BLT.

Though Florida said he considered sandwich-making a creative endeavor, many service-sector jobs don't make the cut when it comes to the number-crunching part of his argument. He defines the creative class by occupation, rather than by traditional measures such as employer or education. It includes not only the stereotypical bohemians, such as artists, dancers, and writers -- classified as "super creatives" -- but also accountants, lawyers, mathematicians and computer programmers.

All told, the definition covers about 47 percent of the Washington workforce, making the region much more than a government town, according to research by Steven Pedigo, one of Florida's former students and now the research manager at the Greater Washington Initiative.

Florida ticked off the presence of XM Satellite Radio Holdings Inc., Discovery Communications Inc., Weekly Standard editor Bill

Kristol and liberal economics writer William Greider, as examples of the dynamic.

Such a constellation of people and companies and interests forms "organically," Florida said. In 2000, developers encouraged telecom and tech companies to move to the next destination on Florida's August city tour, First and M streets NE, the heart of NoMa. A few came, but the migration trickled to a halt as the dot-com boom went bust.

The area has since shown signs of life with the opening of a Metro station, XM's headquarters and growing interest from developers. But standing on First Street, Florida said he found the idea of an organized technology corridor laughable. "The whole idea you can create a technology district as a real estate solution doesn't work," he said. A Google-esque endeavor was never going to take root there without nearby universities pumping out the necessary talent to create it, he said.

The conditions necessary for technological innovation are not unlike the ones that produced local punk-rock band Fugazi in the 1980s, Florida explained later, flashing his knowledge of the local music scene.

"I know a little bit -- enough to be dangerous -- about the music scene here. . . . The only really culturally innovative thing besides go-go was that whole new-wave punk movement that came out of DC in the '80s," Florida said, adding that it "had a lot to do with a lot of smart kids going to college here and cheap rents to create spaces like the 9:30 Club."

Another major factor in attracting creative-class types is "openness," he said. And so far, Washington has proved to be more open than Pittsburgh, especially relating to his contention that a large gay presence correlates positively with a city's economic performance.

The idea didn't fly too well in Steel City.

He also views racial and ethnic diversity as a source of strength, and said he felt that Washington's large black middle class had made the region more tolerant.

"I think most of my critics distort my ideas. 'Florida is for bohemians and gays and not for families.' Duh. I'm a member of a family," he said. "I wanted to say artists and culturally creative people have relevance. Not that they run the show. But if they're going to make all this effort to focus on technological incubation . . . these people have relevance, too."

"My work isn't about a place to get a latte and night life. What my work is about is harnessing the energy we see in the community."

When he isn't teaching at George Mason or traveling the world for speaking engagements, Florida, 48, can be found biking in Rock Creek Park or working in his Cleveland Park study, which looks like an art gallery. The walls, the couch, and his desk are white. Color is confined to a few places -- the jackets of his books, which line several shelves along one wall, a Warhol-style print of Beethoven over the mantle and an electric guitar in a stand on the floor.

When he and his wife go out, it is often to Gallery Place. During the August jaunt, he found the corner of Seventh and F streets NW in the middle of a weekday afternoon totally compelling.

What appealed to him was the variety of people that flowed past. "It would be interesting to sit here with a notebook and code who you think is here," he said, "You got new immigrants, IT guys, security guards."

Despite Gallery Place's prefab jumble of modern and historic-looking facades, he pronounced it free of "urban development crimes."

"They didn't violate this neighborhood by destroying its history," he said, though he looked askance at a CVS sign and a Fuddruckers.

Like other creative-class centers, Washington is already facing threats to the vital mix, he said: a dearth of affordable housing and rising income inequality. The very dynamics that are attracting creative-class workers to the area are also helping drive out the qualities they seek. And that, in turn, can lead to stifling homogeneity -- a creativity killer.

"Once a place gets boring, even the rich people leave," he said. "Do I really want to live in a region where everybody looks and acts like me?"

Take Adams Morgan, which he cited in "The Rise of the Creative Class" as having the sort of multicultural sensibility and street life that creative-class types crave. A recent drive through the neighborhood on a Saturday night changed that view.

"I was in shock. . . . Adams Morgan has become something fundamentally different on the weekend," he said, referring to the throngs of inebriated, pizza-eating twentysomethings filling the streets. "This isn't the place it's going to happen. This is Las Vegas or something."

On U Street, Florida wondered whether revitalization had already extracted a price.

"I can barely see the legacy of Duke Ellington," he said. Authenticity, he mused, had been sacrificed for "success."

All was not lost, however.

On the way out of Busboys and Poets, a cafe-restaurant tucked inside a new condo development, Florida picked up a free literary journal titled "Divided City." In its pages, he appeared to find the sense of "realness" he had found lacking in the streetscape.

"Holy [expletive]. These people need to be in the debate," he said, paging through it intensely.

He stopped on a poem titled "Towards a Forced Migration of Cranes."

"Emu, ostrich, egret, owl, anything but crane," it read. "Any thing but the flock of cranes that has migrated to this city, migrated to this city to breed contempt and feast on the young and old yet tender, once bold people of this city."

"Holy [expletive], this is it. This is it!" he said. "Oh, this is amazing. It's capturing the emotion of how this city is lived."