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Healthcare's rise, creating new maladies

2017 at 8:00 am Updated April 21, 2017 at 4:43 pm



Seattle skyline last December in a view from West Seattle (Seattle Times)

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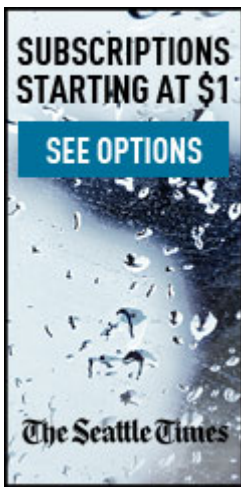
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Richard Florida, whose influential ‘Rise of the Creative Class’ pegged cities’ future to their success in cultivating that group, says a new urban crisis is spreading as a few metros win almost all the marbles. But something deeper than city-level policies is at work, too.

Richard Florida, always a fan of cities including Seattle, seems to be having some second thoughts.

The 2002 publication of his book, “The Rise of the Creative Class,” turned a professor into as much of a famous public intellectual as our age will allow. Florida argued that creative professions, which he estimated made up about 30 percent of the American workforce, were causing tectonic changes in the economy, our cities, politics and lives. Value in the economy would come much more from creative work than traditional labor, and the challenge was to add creativity, bolstered by technology, to more jobs.



The book was immensely influential; it got the attention of leaders in many U.S. cities that were desperate to reboot their troubled economies.

He also took plenty of flak, including from those who took umbrage at Florida's contention that tolerant cities, including those that embraced different sexual orientations, did better economically. Critics, without reading the book closely, accused Florida of advocating a future of latte-quaffing poets or downplaying the costs to those outside the creative economy.

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The debate was so intense that a revised edition was published in 2012. It delved even further into how the many forces valuing creative work caused rising inequality.

In both cases, Florida was describing what's been playing out in Seattle since the 1990s and intensifying since the Great Recession.

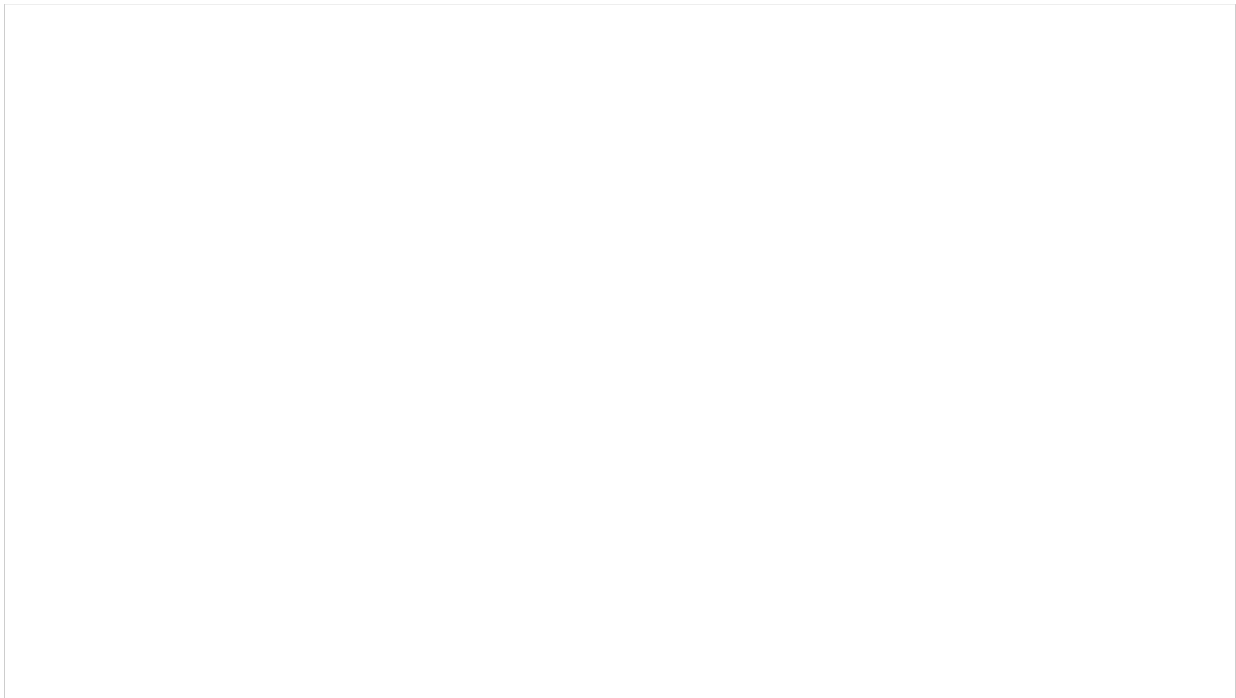
Now, however, Florida is fully confronting what he sees as one of the biggest maladies caused by the phenomenon he identified 15 years ago. What he calls “winner-take-all urbanism” connects the sparkling rebound of some American cities with the rise of inequality, poverty and segregation.

Again, at least in the views of many activists, he could be writing about Seattle’s discontents, despite its prosperity and its advantages as a creative-class destination.

“Just when it seemed that our cities were really turning a corner, when people and jobs were moving back to them, a host of new urban challenges — from rising inequality to increasingly unaffordable housing and more — started to come to the fore,” Florida writes. “Seemingly overnight, the much-hoped-for urban revival has turned into a new kind of urban crisis.”

The excerpt comes from his latest book, “The New Urban Crisis: How Our Cities Are Increasing Inequality, Deepening Segregation, and Failing the Middle Class — And What We Can Do About It.”

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In other words, doing everything right in attracting and retaining the creative class is not enough.

As usual, one must study Florida closely, not pick snippets. He’s a serious scholar whose ideas must be wrestled with. I’ve found myself in agreement with him more often than not.

Here's some context. The original "Urban Crisis" of the 1960s and 1970s was characterized by massive white flight, riots, freeways destroying neighborhoods, factories closing, high crime and transit systems often neglected. Indeed, some of today's inequality, segregation and poverty can be traced to that earlier period.

But if I understand Florida, he's arguing that today's troubles are a consequence of the success of a few cities such as Seattle, and especially New York, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco. And they are also victims because of affordability.

As Florida correctly puts it, these cities have "wildly disproportionate shares" of advanced industries, startups and talent.

But what really caused this? One big driver was decades of lax antitrust enforcement after 1981 that caused most medium and even large cities to lose their most important headquarters, banks, airline hubs and other assets.



Another was ill-considered trade agreements. Like the creative class, they minted winners but also many losers, and often among the most vulnerable, people with less education and ability to find new well-paying work.

Policies that constantly drove wealth upward while most Americans saw little or no gain in their wages are also to blame. These include hefty tax cuts for the rich, failure to invest in job-creating infrastructure and making it harder for workers to unionize.

Technology replaced many workers, especially those in middle-wage jobs. More of this is on the way.

Florida remains no fan of suburbia. Instead, among other responses he advocates reforming zoning and building codes to encourage more building in cities, investing in

infrastructure “to spur density and clustering and limit costly and inefficient sprawl” and turning low-wage jobs into middle-class ones.

These are all worthy goals although there is only so much one can do with the city of Seattle’s 84 square miles of land, the high demand for living here, and many neighborhoods that don’t want to become part of the next Manhattan.

Many people still crave a single-family detached house with a yard. They don’t want to live the city life in apartments or condos.



Seattle is doing many things Florida advocates, including building more residences and investing in workers through community colleges. Like other successful blue cities, Seattle’s leaders want to address all the ills Florida describes.

Unfortunately, the “sweet spot” is in re-creating opportunity in the cities that have been so badly hurt by the economic changes of the past few decades. I think of ones in the industrial Midwest with great bones but many losses.

Yet after the disappointment of trying to keep or attract creative-class companies and talent, many lack the means or will to boot up to the economy as it is today. I’m not sure it can be done with the new White House so hostile to cities and pro-urban policies.

Seattle offers some best practices, such as improving transit. But most of its power is unique, a combination of locale, history, hard work and, yes, luck.

The real crisis is one of widely shared opportunity. Cities are only putting it on the most vivid display.

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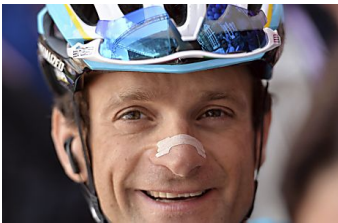
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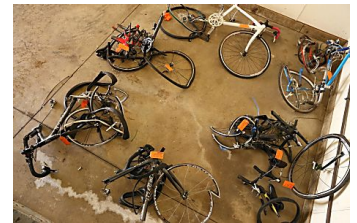
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