

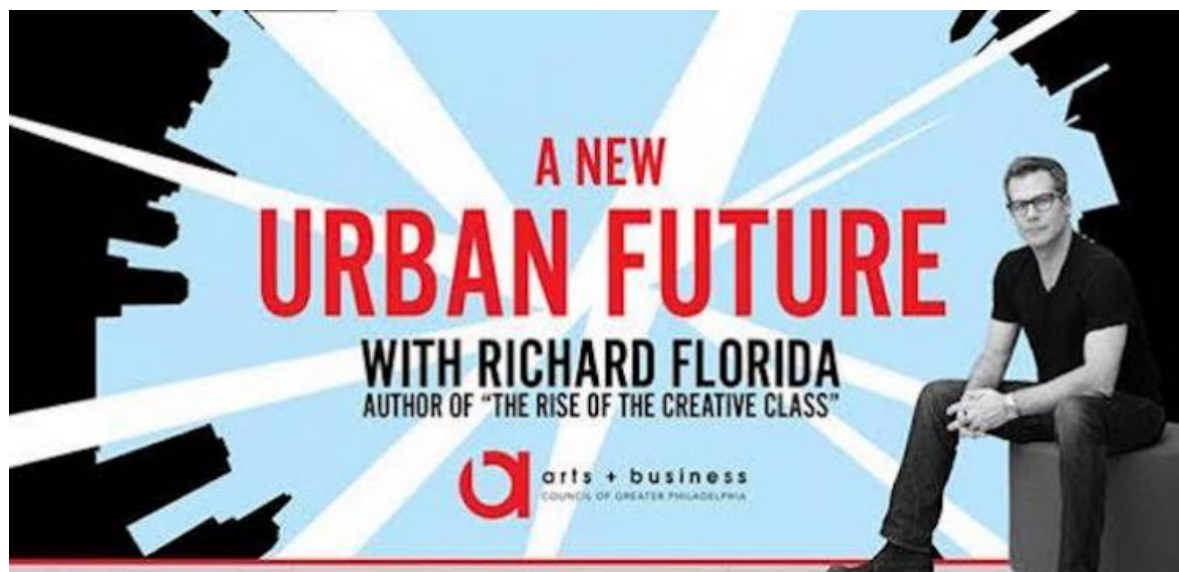
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Richard Florida on the new 'Urban Crisis': The feds will never save us again

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- By [Jake Blumgart](#)
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Richard Florida is feeling reflective. He became the equivalent of an urban planning rock star with the publication of his book *The Rise of the Creative Class* 15 years ago. In the intervening years, the book's thesis— attract young creative professionals and your city will flourish— seems to have proven both portentous and problematic.

As housing prices in superheated urban hubs like New York and San Francisco climb to absurd heights, and inequality warps the nation's politics, Florida fears that America's major urban areas are suffering from too much of a good thing. He calls it "winner-take-all" urbanism and he believes it contributed to the rise of politicians like [Rob Ford](#) and Donald Trump.

On Thursday, Florida brought this message to an audience at the Prince Theater in downtown Philadelphia, where he waxed enthusiastic about Center City and even admitted to being tempted to move to the city.*

But despite his cheery demeanor, Florida also bore a message of doom. The name of his new book, *The New Urban Crisis*, suggests that the cities he so confidently heralded are in for hard times ahead.

If anything, they are in an even more perilous position today than they were as he stitched together his book in 2016. The final chapter, he admitted had to be rewritten in light of President Donald Trump's victory.

Florida is now suggesting that [power be devolved to the local level](#), taking a stance traditionally associated with conservatives, allowing cities far more control over their legislation and taxes. In this way, American cities can differentiate, and by heightening contradictions, allow

everyone to pick the type of environment that works best for them.

“We need to take power out of Washington and hand it back to our cities and metro areas,” said Florida. “It’s the only way to grow our country and the only way to overcome the divide. We can’t live together anymore because we are so divided: red and blue, winner and loser.”

“The national government and federal government has become too big,” said Florida, “and there’s too much of an imperial presidency.”

Though he’s sounding very much like a Republican of yesteryear, the policies that Florida promotes are just a left leaning as ever. As Florida energetically stalked back and forth across the stage, he denounced tough-on-crime policies like the “Three Strikes” laws, argued that service sector workers need a big wage boost, and that more affordable housing and public transportation must be constructed.

Florida also said that as President Trump pulls federal resources from local areas, it would be incumbent upon municipal politicians to maximize the strength of their urban centers.

“We have to build more and build it quickly,” said Florida. “We have to increase density and overcome NIMBYism.”

Florida did not say how such lofty, and often expensive, goals are to be accomplished at the local level. In Philadelphia, minimum wage increases are [preempted by the state government](#) (which Gov. Tom Wolf is [proposing in his budget proposal](#)) while other local labor laws are threatened by [Republicans in Harrisburg](#) or the [local Chamber of Commerce](#) (a co-sponsor of Florida’s lecture). The broad demand that new affordable housing be built is [impossible to achieve at scale](#) on a local level. (San Francisco recently raised \$310 million for affordable housing, which is [expected to create less than 1,000 units](#).) When it comes to building densely, local politicians have often declared themselves on the side of those saying not-in-my-backyard (or, in this city, [not-in-my-parking-space](#)).

The event didn’t allow time for an audience question-and-answer session, instead leaving the task to Drexel University’s John Fry and University City Science Center’s Steve Tang.

They opened by asking Florida what it would take to get him to move to Philadelphia.

Florida assured them that he is very happy at the University of Toronto and that for the next year at least he will be very busy establishing what he describes as the world’s first “School of Cities.”

“But once that’s accomplished, I’ll be very frank with you, I like Philadelphia a lot,” said Florida. “It’s a lot more affordable, it’s close to home [Florida is from Newark], and my team likes it. I don’t think it would take much, but it would take a commitment to building a great think tank capacity.”

Between Drexel and Penn, Fry said laughingly, they should be able to come up with something.

Tang queried Florida about how their institutions could bring broader prosperity to West Philadelphia, where they are both based. He said that too often the only jobs the anchor institutions brought were hospitality jobs that capped out at \$50,000.

How could they bring six-figure employment to Mantua and Cobbs Creek? Florida politely disputed the premise of the question. Sure, the anchor institutions could try to get more people in the neighborhoods the skills and training to win six-figure salaries. But they could also pay hospitality workers family-sustaining wages.

The superstar academic then described how his father’s wages as a factory worker rose after World War 2, whereas during the Depression the family’s manufacturing jobs only brought in poverty-level wages.

“We decided as a society that [factory workers] would no longer make poverty wages,” said Florida, referring to the [mid-century boom years](#). “That’s what Karl Marx was raving about. William Blake called them ‘satanic mills’. People were impoverished and yet working 7 days a week, 12 hours a day. Then we decided ‘no,’ we are going to make a middle class.”

Florida did not mention that a powerful labor movement, emboldened by a federal government that didn’t use the state’s police powers to subdue striking workers, contributed mightily to this happy state of affairs. (Although he surely knows it, given the subject matter expertise displayed in this [2014 interview with Jacobin magazine](#).) It is difficult to imagine similar circumstances reemerging without the federal government playing an active role again.

But for Florida, Trump’s victory means that Washington D.C. will no longer be an active force in labor law, affordable housing, or urban affairs.

“My big takeaway from this election is that the feds will never save us ever again,” said Florida. “At least not in the United States...No, it’s going to be up to us, in our communities.”

**PlanPhilly was a media partner for this event.*

About the author

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Jake Blumgart is PlanPhilly's planning, development, and housing reporter. He covers the city's built environment and the people who live and work there. He lives in Cedar Park and has also contributed to Slate, CityLab, Next City, The Philadelphia Inquirer, Philadelphia Magazine, and the American Planning Association's magazine. Follow him on Twitter @jblumgart and email him at jblumgart@whyy.org.

