

The author of *Rise of the Creative Class* is grappling with its dark side

Updated by Timothy B. Lee | tim@vox.com | May 9, 2017, 11:40am EDT

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No one has done more to promote the return of educated professionals to cities than Richard Florida. In his 2002 classic ***The Rise of the Creative Class***, Florida argued that “creative class” professionals like engineers, artists, architects, and college professors held the key to revitalizing America’s cities. He encouraged cities to cater to the tastes of these creative professionals by developing walkable urban neighborhoods well-served by transit and with ample amenities.

Florida’s predictions have come true even more quickly than he expected. “I would have never predicted that this urban revival would come steam-rolling through the way it has,” Florida told me.

The stampede of creative professionals into urban areas has had real benefits, but it has also had major costs that Florida didn't anticipate 15 years ago. Rents in the most dynamic cities have skyrocketed, pricing many ordinary Americans out. Cities have become more segregated by income and economic class. Mixed-income neighborhoods have been on the decline, replaced by concentrated pockets of wealth and poverty.

Florida, a professor at the University of Toronto, says that his real wake-up call on these issues came in 2010, when Toronto elected a Trump-like figure called Rob Ford to be its mayor. Like Trump, Ford was a scandal-plagued candidate who won the election by pandering to downscale voters and blasting Toronto's urban elites. Florida started to realize that Ford's election reflected simmering dissatisfaction with Toronto's growing economic and cultural divides.

In a phone call last week, Florida explained his current thinking about the state of American cities. And he argued that America's changing urban landscape explains a lot about the election of Donald Trump last November. The transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

Timothy B. Lee

What do you mean when you talk about the new urban crisis?

Richard Florida

I would say there are two things. The first is this clustering of knowledge assets, technology, firms, startups, universities, human capital, talent that so many of us have seen as the motor for innovation and entrepreneurship and productivity and economic growth. That same clustering force is also at the root of these very deep divides in our society. That expresses itself differently in New York or San Francisco or London than it does in Detroit or Cleveland.

The other dimension of the new urban crisis that is not just the decline of the middle class but the decline of those middle-class neighborhoods that were the platforms for upward mobility and social cohesion and the American Dream. We've seen not just the decline of the middle class but the decline of those middle-class neighborhoods in cities and suburbs alike.

Timothy B. Lee

The book has been marketed as your mea culpa for some of the ideas you wrote about in your 2002 book *The Rise of the Creative Class*. But I didn't actually see that in the book. Are there big arguments in your earlier work that you now see as mistaken?

Richard Florida

I think if anything I under-predicted. I would have never predicted that this urban revival would come steam-rolling through the way it has.

The other thing is that I could not anticipate were the divides this would create. It was **Rob Ford's 2010 election** as mayor of Toronto that was my kick in the ass. I'm sitting here in Toronto working with the mayor on an inclusive prosperity agenda, thinking about how do we upgrade these service jobs. I thought there was no way in hell Toronto would elect this guy.

Then I came across this **incredible research** by my University of Toronto colleague David Hulchanski. It's amazing. He goes and looks at the data on Toronto's socioeconomic geography. In the year 1970, 66 percent of Torontonians lived in middle-class neighborhoods. By the year 2005, it was 29 percent. The city was cleaved. There are now these areas of concentrated wealth and poverty.

In the Ford case, it wasn't just the white working class that got him elected. It was **multi-ethnic**: Indian, Caribbean, and Chinese. That was my big wake-up call.

In that way I had kind of a leg up on Trump. But I still never would have imagined that Trump would be elected. I under-predicted the extent of the division caused by this clustering force.

I really do think this phenomenon is geographic and spacial. It's not just economic inequality but spacial inequality at two scales: One is spacial inequality within cities, but the other one is a winner-take-all dynamic between the winning cities and the losing cities.

We live in a much spikier world. In 1990, 22 percent of venture capital-backed startups were in the San Francisco Bay Area. By 2015 it was 45 percent. The spikiness keeps getting compounded.

I had hoped that many of the places that were second- and third-tier cities would pick up even more and we would have seen less concentration. Despite predictions and prognostications of the "rise of the rest," we've not really seen it.

Timothy B. Lee

What do you think is different now compared to 1995 or 1975? There were plenty of creative professionals in America in the 1970s, but they didn't cluster in superstar cities the way they do today.

Richard Florida

Urban clusters consist of two things: cognitive knowledge work and entrepreneurial team-building. Manual skills are the least concentrated. Cognitive and knowledge skills are second most concentrated. The thing that concentrates most are managerial mobilization skills, entrepreneurial skills, team-building skills, networking skills. Those things are what concentrates in the big cities.

So I think that what's happened is that as our economy has migrated from a manufacturing economy to a more cognitive, knowledge-based, entrepreneurial economy. Those things have migrated much more to bigger cities, superstar cities, and knowledge hubs. And there's been lock-in effects. And it's just magnified itself.

Timothy B. Lee

A century ago, Frederick Jackson Turner had a **famous theory** that the American frontier had promoted equality by allowing the economy's losers to move in search of new opportunities. In the book you write about Kenneth Jackson's idea that the suburbs were the "**crabgrass frontier**" of the 20th century. But now the suburbs have basically filled up,

and that makes me wonder if the changes we're seeing now is the inevitable consequence of that. Maybe a societies without a frontier naturally become more segregated and unequal.

Richard Florida

Maybe we can have a new urban frontier. Maybe that's rebuilding the old industrial belt or maybe the Sun Belt is somewhat a new frontier. But in some way the classical, canonical frontier has been run out of gas, and with it goes the cheap growth we got in the initial frontier.

I think about my Dad and Mom moving to Newark. They bought a suburban home cheap in North Arlington, New Jersey. My dad could drive his Chevy to the factory in 10 minutes. There was no traffic down the highway. Now, due to the size and scale of our metropolitan areas, because of the investments in knowledge institutions, it's becoming more expensive.

However, I think in the field of urban planning we get this idea that either everyone is moving in or everyone is moving out. It's either intensification or extensification. Actually the history of American urbanism is a history of both. We intensify and extensify at the same time. Part of why I tried to add the suburbs to my analysis is we're not only going to intensify, but the way out of it is a new kind of extensification. It may be around subway stops and train stops. It may be around different kinds of transit. But it's not going to be all in or all out, it's going to be both. There's no way we can pack everyone in towers in midtown Manhattan.

It's really hard for me to imagine another cheap solution out of this. At least in the more developed places, the solutions are going to cost more.

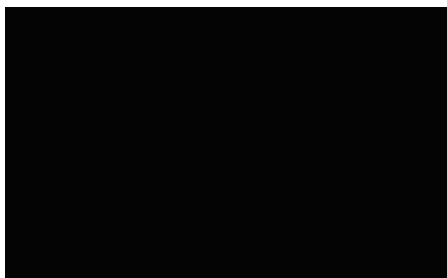
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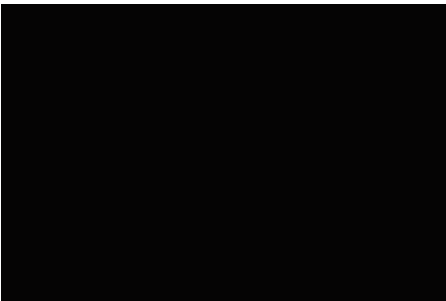
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