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Digger

This guy convinced cities to cater to tech-savvy millennials. Now he's reconsidering.

By Jonathan O'Connell April 17

Richard Florida is rethinking things.

Since publishing the best-selling book “The Rise of the Creative Class” in 2002, Florida has used his considerable speaking and writing heft to push mayors, urban planners and company executives to cater to tech-savvy young professionals.

His argument, in short, was that in order to save themselves from post-industrial ruin, cities needed to attract the best young talent in computer programming, engineering, finance, media and the arts so their towns could build economies based upon the venture capital and start-up companies the new workforce would produce.

Often taking a cue from Florida’s mantra, real estate developers dialed up hip but tiny apartments designed for creative millennials and outfitted them with coffee bars, gyms, pool tables, bocce courts, pool decks and fire pits. Mayors invested in better sidewalks, bike lanes and business incubators aimed at nurturing the new arrivals and keeping them around longer.

Somewhere along the way, however, Florida realized that the workers he so cajoled were eating their cities alive.

In places like New York, San Francisco, Seattle and arguably Washington, the mostly white, young and wealthy “creative class” has so fervently flocked to urban neighborhoods that they have effectively pushed out huge populations of mostly blue-collar and often poor or minority residents.

“I think, to be honest, I and others didn’t realize the contradictory effect,” Florida said Tuesday at a panel discussion. He said he realizes now that prompting creative types to cluster in small areas clearly drove living costs to such heights that low-income and oftentimes middle-income households have been forced elsewhere, creating a divide he did not anticipate.

“We are cramming ourselves into this limited amount of space. And at the same time that the super-affluent, the advantaged, the creative class — we could go on and on [with what to call them] — the techies, global super-rich, absentee investors, invest in these cities, they push others out … and it carves these divides,” he said.

How much of the boom American, Canadian and European cities have experienced can be attributed to Florida’s influence is difficult to discern, but the popularity of his book and its sequels, along with his founding of the CityLab website in partnership with Atlantic Media, plus numerous speaking gigs, made him a household name in planning and business circles. In 2007, for instance, he shared a star turn with futurist Alvin Toffler and Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Thomas Friedman at a National Conference of the Creative Economy, hosted by the Fairfax County Economic Development Authority.

Last week’s event, held at Union Market in Northeast Washington, drew a crowd of more than 500 people and must have felt like something of a reunion for people who have reshaped Washington since dysfunction and governmental malfeasance drove Congress to temporarily put the city under the authority of a financial control board in 1995. Two former city administrators and three D.C. planning directors attended, dating back to former mayor Anthony Williams’s administration.

But as inequality has deepened in top cities, writers on class and poverty have begun to take sharper aim at Florida’s theory, calling the “creative class” a fallacy and a failed experiment, not because he was wrong that investing in cities would help draw the creative class, but because he argued that doing so would benefit cities at large.

So although he still champions investments in urban areas, at the panel event Florida said the criticism had made a mark. “To be seen as the neoliberal devil, foisting gentrification on cities, is not a situation I like to be seen in,” he said.

Like any good ideas man, Florida has a new idea to fix the old idea, and a book to go with it, called “The New Urban Crisis.” In an excerpt published on his web site, Florida explained the turnaround in his thinking.

> It became increasingly clear to me that the same clustering of talent and economic assets generates a lopsided, unequal urbanism in which a relative handful of superstar cities, and a few elite neighborhoods within them, benefit while many other places stagnate or fall behind. Ultimately, the very same force that drives the growth of our cities and economy broadly also generates the divides that separate us and the contradictions that hold us back.

For others taking the stage at the forum, the balancing act between attracting top talent and retaining the middle class is more than an intellectual exercise.

D.C. Mayor Muriel E. Bowser (D) said she appreciated the growth that Florida’s initial ideas had helped drive.

“We were a town that was broke,” she said. “We were threatened to be taken over by the Congress. We had populations that were declining instead of the tremendous growth that we see now. We had a well-earned reputation for bad business relationships and being bad for business. We’ve spent a couple of decades turning all of those things around.”

But she also acknowledged the effect the growth has had on affordability.

“While we are booming in many ways, we are a city that’s becoming inaccessible to people in many ways,” she said. She is investing in affordable housing and focusing on public education and public safety, which she said enabled the city to “attract people, families and businesses, and those have led to soaring revenues that allow us to make the human services investments that we need.”

[The rent is too high in big cities. This mayor has a plan to fix it.]

Some in the development community also are taking notice. South Carolina-based Edens, the real estate firm behind the successful foodie destination Union Market, is now planning a bold neighborhood remake that could bring 4,500 new apartments to an area currently occupied by warehouses, wholesalers and parking lots. Jodie McLean, chief executive of Edens, said her company only maximizes profits in unique and thriving neighborhoods that retain their diversity. “Success for us only comes when we’re in the most vibrant places,” she said.

As the District’s balancing act continues, Bowser and McLean are likely to be at the heart of it. McLean’s firm and others are pushing the city to fund $90 million or more in improvements for the area, including an expansive parking garage that would accommodate luxury apartment renters and boutique-seeking shoppers. Whether it would provide more public amenities is unclear.

Seen in Florida’s frame, the question might be not whether such an investment would move the city forward but in which direction Washington ought to head.

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