

# White: Richard Florida could take a page from Calgary's urban songbook



*RICHARD WHITE*

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Richard Florida's new book, *The New Urban Crisis*, will come out this year. *FILE / POSTMEDIA*

When Richard Florida, the 21st century urban studies guru, speaks, lots of people listen. Ears really perked up when Florida admitted, “I got it wrong that the creative class could magically restore our cities, become a new middle class like my father’s and were going to live happily forever after. I could not have anticipated among all this urban growth and revival there was a dark side to the urban creative revolution, a very deep dark side.” (Houston Chronicle, Oct 24, 2016).

Back in 2000, Florida published his first book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, and immediately became a media star with his mantra, “if your city is attractive to the creative class, they will come.”

He quickly converted many urban planners and politicians to his dogma, which, in many ways, was just a reworking of Jane Jacobs’ key messages about the importance of bohemia and small-scale development in her 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

## **Creative Class 101**

Florida hypothesized a key paradigm shift in the employee/employer relationship was happening — no longer would workers move to where the jobs are, but rather employers will move to where employees want to live. He preached that if a city wanted new businesses to locate in their city, all they had to do was create a city where the creative class wanted to play, live and then work.

The creative class was a broad term that included software, computer game and app developers, 3-D computer artists, as well as painters and sculptors. It also included architects, interior designers, graphic artists, actors, musicians, writers, chiefs, film and video makers.

His research included creating indexes to measure a city’s attractiveness to the creative class – Talent, Technology, Bohemian, Mosaic, Gay (today, that would be the LGBT Index), and Tolerance indices.

**If you build, it they will come...**

Florida's research documented the creative class wanted things like a vibrant festivals, music and café culture. They also love places — to skateboard, play disc golf, fly a kite, bike ride, roller blade or just hang out.

Today, Florida, a University of Toronto professor, admits appealing to the creative class won't work for every city. In fact, it will only work for a few. And to add insult to injury where it has succeeded (Austin, Seattle, San Francisco, New York and Washington), it has resulted in skyrocketing house prices to the point where only the highly paid can live.

Indeed, appealing to the creative class actually became a catalyst for gentrification, not diversification and vitalization.

## **Creative Class Loves Calgary?**

At the turn of this century, Calgary's city centre had many of the ingredients Florida identified as those appealing to the creative class. We had great urban parks and pathways — Prince's Island, Shaw Millennium Park and an extensive river pathway system. Calgary's construction of the world's largest skateboard park in 2000 is exactly what Florida would have recommended to attract the creative class.

We also had a small but vibrant live music scene and a local cafe culture. Our festival scene was taking off with the likes of Sled Island and our International Film Festival and Underground Film Festival. We also had fun theatre festivals like the High Performance Rodeo, Animated Objects (puppet) and One Act Play festivals. In addition, Calgary's cuisine scene was sizzling with the opening of Laurier Lounge, The Living Room and numerous sushi restaurants.

The growth of Calgary's cosplay festival (Calgary Expo) over the past 10 years into Canada's second largest and our Pride Parade from a few thousand people to over 60,000 is evidence Calgary has been successful in attracting the creative class to our city.

However, Calgary's creative class is unique as it is dominated by a strong GABEsters culture i.e. geologists, accountants, brokers, bankers and engineers. Indeed, for the past 50 years, Calgary has attracted the cream of the crop of new GABEsters from universities across Canada and beyond to work in the oil patch.

Call them whatever you want, young professionals began to revitalize the Beltline, Kensington, Bridgeland and Inglewood 20 years ago. And it is still continuing today even with the downturn in the economy. Places like Bridgeland's Luke's Mart, Cannibale Barbershop and Cocktails and Bridgett Bar in the Beltline make Calgary's city centre very attractive to young hipsters.

A big bonus for all of these communities is they are within easy walking and cycling distance to downtown, which even with all the vacancies has more occupied office space than Austin, Portland or Vancouver.

Fortunately, Calgary seems to have the best of both worlds. We have been able to attract the creative class, while avoiding the skyrocketing city centre home prices plaguing places like Vancouver, Toronto, Seattle and San Francisco.

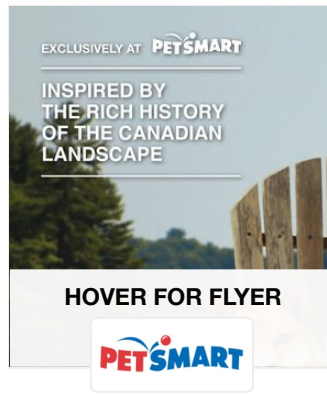
## **Florida's New Urban Crisis**

In 2017, Florida will publish his new book, *The New Urban Crisis*, which will address affordable housing shortages in gentrified districts, need to link suburbs to inner city with mass transit and need to raise wages of service workers so they can afford to live near the city centre where their jobs are.

Again, Calgary appears to be ahead of Florida with numerous affordable inner-city housing programs and several new mass transit programs linking the suburbs to the city centre – Green Line, S.W. and Forest Lawn BRT.

## **Last Word**

Despite all our faults, Calgary has perhaps the most diverse, attractive and affordable collection of urban and suburban communities in North America.



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