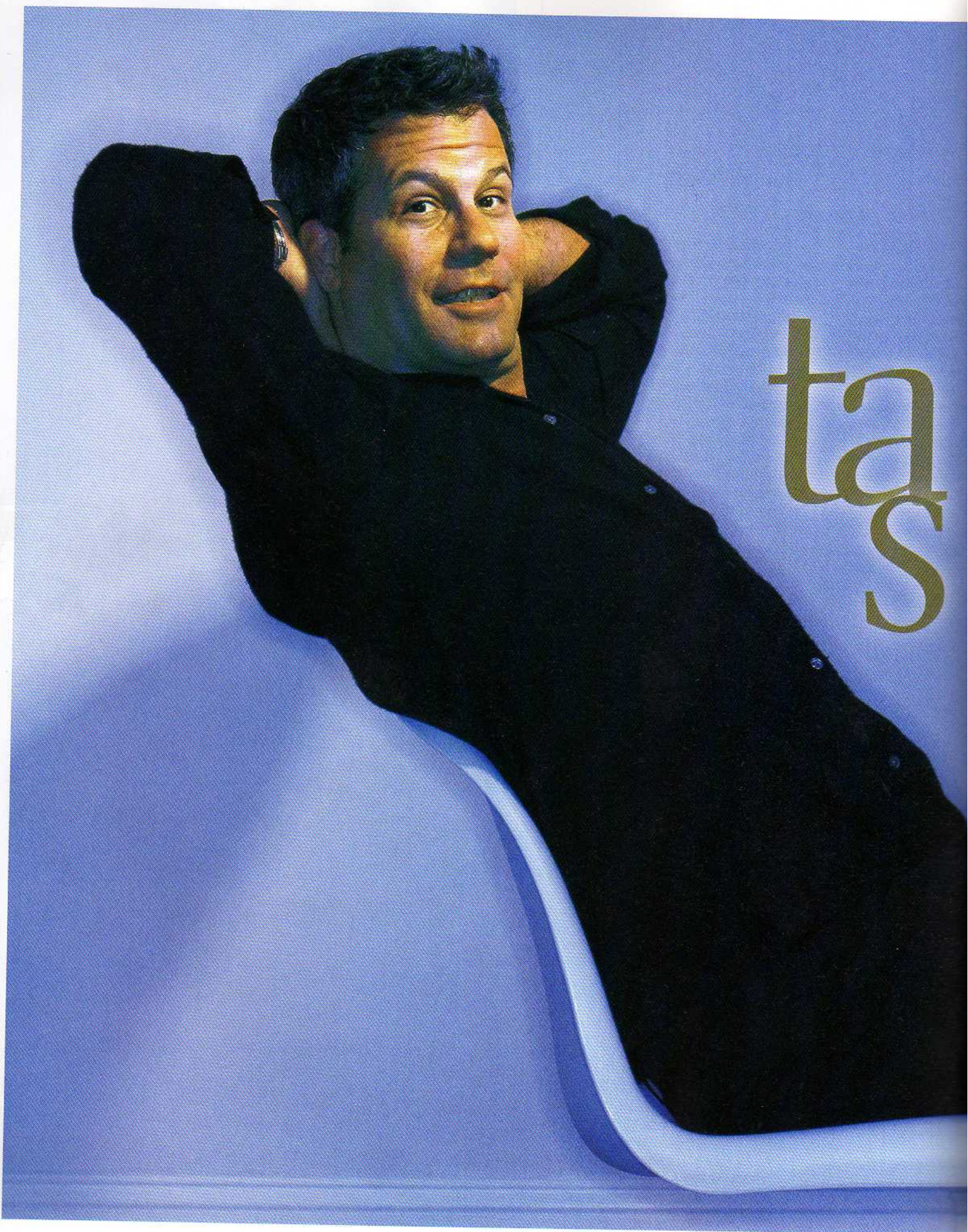


Richard
Florida on
how business
should use
the creative
class

talent scout



tags

Richard Florida wrote
the book on creativity.
Now the critics are
getting louder he's all
red up to take the
message on the road

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out

Richard Florida has just woken up. Not to the emergence of the creative class – he identified that years ago. Not to the dangers of a society reluctant to let go of its industrial past – he is calculating those implications right now. And as for the Bush administration's lack of support for creative people, he has watched that with dismay for three years.

No, Richard Florida has literally just woken up. "Coffee?" he asks, padding around his kitchen with his grey-flecked black hair looking suspiciously like it has been styled to look as though it hasn't been styled. If you want a poster child for the creative class, Florida is it: he's slowly waking up at 10.30am, a consequence of being most productive in the wee small hours; he wears hip jeans, a black T-shirt and a chunky silver Rolex; he has black, heavy-rimmed, square reading glasses. Rather than cross his legs, he spreads out, leans back and clasps his hands behind his head, his black boxer shorts firmly above the top of his jeans in what may or may not be a homage to funky rapper dudes.

The irony, of course, is that this 44-year-old professor at Carnegie Mellon University, author of the wildly popular book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, captain of the good ship Creativity, is in Pittsburgh, which is about as uncool as cities get. Maybe that's the point: Florida sees Pittsburgh as something of a petrie dish for his theories, which have gained serious traction since *The Rise of the Creative Class* was released in the US two years ago. Those theories are well known: that there is a creative sector in economies alongside manufacturing and services; that the creative sector is the growth engine and, at least in a country such as the US, the key to future economic success as menial work migrates overseas; that the factors that foster the development of creative communities include openness and tolerance, typically found in areas with large gay and ethnic populations.

After a lengthy honeymoon, the backlash against Florida's theories is under way. "I love that, I love that, oh yeah," he says, smiling. The criticism, in Florida's view, means his theories are gaining mainstream acceptance; otherwise, why would publications such as *The Wall Street Journal* bother? In that newspaper, in January, a senior fellow of the Manhattan Institute, Steven Malanga, said Florida's theories were "economic snake oil" that relied on big, dubious leaps in logic. The first, Malanga said, was Florida's claim there was a causal connection between factors that foster creativity and economic growth; the second, the idea that creative workers are the economic growth engine rather than companies themselves.

Florida relishes the fight. Just hours after the interview, he flew to Peoria, a city about 260km south-west of Chicago long seen as emblematic of middle America,

story luke collins photography katherine lambert

“The attractiveness of Sydney or New York or San Francisco... These cities provide a platform for identity construction”

for a speech originally planned to be before about 100 people. When demand swamped organisers, the venue was changed to one catering for 200 people, then another for 500, before it eventually became the Peoria Civic Center, which holds around 2200. If his theories are being bashed by some, they are being embraced by many others.

“I continue to try to clarify the message, and that’s why the criticisms are so useful to me,” Florida says. “Virtually all of the criticism has criticised something other than the book, which is really interesting to me, and has made me understand that life as a public intellectual is very different from life as a regular academic, and that nine times out of 10 your argument will be mis-characterised and made into a straw man.”

Which brings us back to Pittsburgh. And Memphis. And Cincinnati. And countless other cities across America that are slowly disintegrating as traditional heavy industries struggle, steel mills close and manufacturers export jobs to cheaper countries. At the turn of the 20th century, Pittsburgh was one of America’s most important cities. In *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Florida writes its “financiers and entrepreneurs largely spawned the American steel industry, the aluminium industry (with Alcoa) and the modern electrical industry (with Westinghouse)”. It was, he says, the modern-day equivalent of San Francisco and Seattle combined.

Yet today it is something of a ghost town. Traditional red brick buildings lie empty, factories abandoned. There is only faded grandeur, and its location – a seven-hour drive south-west of New York City, just four hours west of Washington DC – means it struggles to hold onto young, ambitious people. However, Florida has faith. The city is home to several major universities and its civic leaders are aware of the problems: Florida is right there to remind them. In other cities such as Memphis, he has worked directly with local governments to develop revitalisation plans centred around his theories, although the results of such efforts are yet to be determined. Building creative hubs does not happen overnight.

No boundaries The appeal of Florida’s theories to such cities is obvious. He suggests governments can play a major role in fostering economic success, and that because creativity (and, in turn, economic growth) is driven by ideas, it is not geographically restricted. The Memphis Manifesto, a conference held last April described as a “call to action” for communities around the US, declared that “creativity resides in everyone

everywhere, so building a community of ideas means empowering all people with the ability to express and use the genius of their own creativity”.

“Natural amenities certainly give you an advantage, but they will not cause you to win the economic competition,” Florida says. “I was visiting San Diego, which arguably is one of the most beautiful cities in the world. I was talking to very young, creative people. People in their late twenties and early thirties said they wanted to move from San Diego and one of the places they said they wanted to move to was Chicago. And I was just aghast. And one woman said it was because “in Chicago, I feel like an adult”. Cities that don’t have natural amenities have to compete by constructed amenities, and they can do that.”

Above all, Florida says, creative people simply want to be themselves: “The attractiveness of Sydney or New York or San Francisco or Seattle ... a guy I interviewed in Seattle said: ‘I grew up in St Louis. I could never be the person I wanted to be or knew I could become. I could never reinvent myself. In Seattle, I can reinvent myself every day.’ That, I think, is a powerful, powerful statement of what these cities provide. They provide a platform for identity construction.”

Of course, that line of thinking has not been universally welcomed. Many critics have decried Florida’s linking of creative and economic growth with communities that welcome homosexuality and ethnic diversity. Others dismiss him as an apologist for the internet boom and suggest the bursting of the technology bubble has undermined his theories. Still more simply say he is wrong: that America’s economic powerhouses are not among Florida’s list of creative centres.

“Mr Florida’s indexes, in fact, are such poor predictors of economic performance that his top cities haven’t even outperformed his bottom ones,” Malanga wrote. “Led by big percentage gains in Las Vegas (the fastest-growing local economy in the nation) as well as in Oklahoma City and Memphis, Mr Florida’s 10 least creative cities turn out to be jobs powerhouses.”

Florida counters that it is misleading to take a snapshot of the American economy and draw conclusions. “Do you really believe that Las Vegas and Anaheim and Oklahoma City in the long run are going to outperform San Francisco and Boston and New York, and Chicago and Sydney and Toronto? I will make that bet with anyone,” he says. “It has made me become much more aware of what other people... of how your ideas get filtered through a lens.”

In an effort to sharpen his theories, Florida is planning two more books. While details are sketchy, it seems they will deal primarily with two issues: global competitiveness, the political climate and how countries need to be constructed to foster creativity; and workplace and management strategy. Florida's main point is that the creative class is emerging but neither governments nor companies seem to know how to deal with it – largely because they are both trying to “impose industrial organisational techniques on it, which aren't working”.

“There are virtually no companies out there who know how to do this,” he says of managing creative workers. “A company like Microsoft, which I admire very much, does this very simply: it uses peer pressure. I think the place we look at this is in the art community, where artists have for a long time organised themselves, like Andy Warhol and The Factory. The other place we look is the laboratory, at what Thomas Edison did long ago and what corporate and university laboratories have long done ... where they allow people to define their own work and then they have certain goals to receive awards. I think what we look at is intrinsic reward structures and peer-based competence, rather than this kind of corporate order.”

Off the leash It comes back to the concept of letting creative people be themselves. Florida says creativity comes in bursts and managers need to adapt to that. “This isn't like managing an assembly line worker,” he says. If someone works best between 10pm and 2am, let him. If a worker needs to go for a run at midday to clear his head, let him. The approach does require a degree of trust, but Florida argues truly creative workers will not abuse their privileges because of an intrinsic desire to succeed.

“So I think there's a variety of things going on, but no one has figured this out so the competition is wide open,” he says. “I think over the course of the next 10 or 20 years we will see this transition take hold. We haven't had the creative destruction that washes away the old and creates the new; the new is still emerging. What's scary in this age is that the weight of the industrial order is so strong, particularly in this country, that it's really blocking the emergence of this. We have this incredibly powerful system which offers much better lives, much more prosperity, but we've blocked its emergence.”

Florida's next book will discuss the political

environment that fosters creativity. In a series of articles during the past year, he has become increasingly disillusioned with the administration of President George W. Bush and the division of America. Looking at his lists of America's creative cities, Florida says that “something like nine in 10 of the most creative states were [2000 Democratic Presidential candidate Al] Gore states, nine in 10 of the lowest scoring states were the Bush states”.

“What's happened in the United States is the creative economy emerged. It set in motion a set of economic and demographic and cultural shifts; the cities became packed with these creative people,” Florida says. “They became centres of self-expression, of rationality, of secularism, of freedom of speech, of gay couples, immigrants, economic success, innovation and creativity. Even the last president, who I liked a lot, did not fully understand this and in a way we kind of thought we were better. This is kind of like a national version of *The Simple Life*, where Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie go with all of their values to a rural place and make fun of the rednecks.

“What happened was those people got really pissed off. They got pissed off, one, because they saw opportunity shifting and all the wealth going to these wacky people with these perverted, hedonistic lifestyles. Most of all because they saw their kids start to adopt these values. Their kids would move ... and they'd call them on the phone and say, ‘You know dad, I have my third job in five years and I'm 28 and still not married and there's this so nice gay guy down the street that I'm friends with.’ This whole old society – traditional, industrial society centred around community and family – evaporated. And these people got really scared.”

Florida argues that fear has sparked a backlash which the Bush administration has tapped into: a core of Americans wishing for the retention of traditional industries (hence new US steel tariffs), traditional moral values (hence Bush's religiosity and the furore over gay marriage), and a resurgence of American isolationism. One problem is that the creative class has done little to fight back, largely because it is disorganised and its members typically eschew formal structures.

“There's a battle going on between creativity and control, and for the moment the forces of control look like they've won,” Florida says. “The best thing I can say about the United States is that ... the United States has incredible transformative capabilities.”

RICHARD'S WAY

Richard Florida will address a lunch in Melbourne on Tuesday, March 16, and speak at a seminar there the following day. He will appear at a seminar in Sydney, and give a free public lecture at the Angel Place Recital Hall, on Thursday, March 18. Enquiries to EventsRus on (07) 3634 9999.

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"This cluster of ideas is one of the most powerful to come about for generations"

"It's not enough to simply replace the Bush administration. You have to have a platform that is broadly inclusive of enough of these people so that they would get on board. If not, it doesn't matter who's president, because that other half of the country will control Congress, the Senate and enough governorships. What you might end up with is two countries with the gay civil union thing, gay union legislation, being a hallmark of those two countries."

So Florida hits the road to get his message out. He gives around 100 speeches a year and says his yardstick for measuring the broad acceptance of his work would be to reduce that to speaking once a week. "I feel obligated to go out there and speak and fund the operation," he says, referring to CreativeClass.org, his vehicle for disseminating his theories. There is also Catalytix, a consulting arm that works with those seeking to implement his theories. Florida says Catalytix largely funds itself.

"Here's what makes me nervous," he says. "I'm nervous about the lack of support for this kind of work. This is the one area that I work in and find it nearly impossible to raise money. It's nearly impossible to raise grant funding. I would argue this cluster of ideas – workforce change, community change – is one of the most powerful clusters of issues to come about for several generations. How many professors or universities do what I do? You can name them on one hand."

The day after our interview, I meet a former professor at Carnegie Mellon whose eyes roll at the mention of Richard Florida's name. "Aah, Rich," she says with a smile, before commenting on his relentless self-promotion. Florida would probably relish that reaction: after all, he is a salesman. The question is whether people will continue to buy. ❖

The Rise of the Creative Class, by Richard Florida, is published by Pluto Press (\$34.95).

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