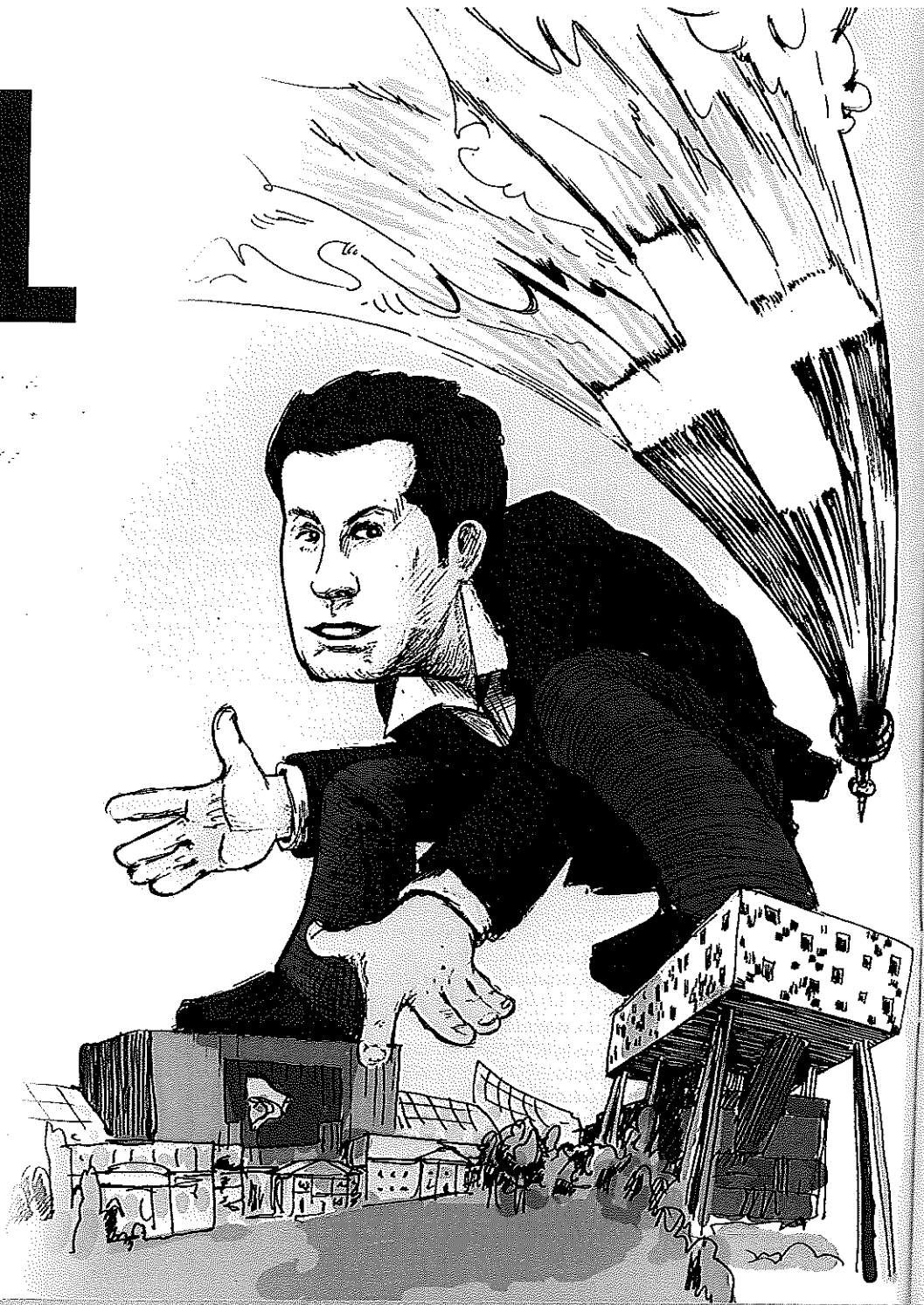



# The ARTFUL TARGET

Richard Florida has faced off against numerous critics since he arrived in Toronto. But the globe-trotting urbanist thinks the world can learn a lot from this city's past and people

**INTERVIEW WITH EDWARD KEENAN** CONTRIBUTING EDITOR  
ILLUSTRATION BY MARC NGUI



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**S**o, are you tired of hearing about Richard Florida yet? You wouldn't be the first in Toronto to feel that way about the most celebrated urbanist since Jane Jacobs. Just ask Richard Florida. "I wish people wouldn't pay so much attention to me. And sometimes when I lay up at night, I'm like, 'I wish I could be less noticed,'" Florida says. "I think that the arguments become too personalized. Too personified. They lose resonance."

Florida is relaxing in a comfy chair in the brick-and-beam environs of the Martin Prosperity Institute, the urban think tank at the MaRS Centre for Innovation on College Street he moved to Toronto to form in 2007. It's a cool, ultramodern facility, and it represents both the reason why Florida is so optimistic about our city's potential, and the fundamental talking point of his most recent detractors. Had he been born in Canada, we would have expected someone like Florida to bolt for the States years ago. But the opposite happened, and it's because there's a willingness here to embrace the man and his ideas — institutionally, politically, and philosophically.

But the love is hardly universal. The upstart Creative Class Struggle, a collective formed to challenge "the presence of Richard Florida and the Martin Prosperity Institute," has been getting a fair bit of ink in the local press for their commentary against Florida and his ideas. When *Spacing* spoke to him in early summer, Florida was clearly in the mood to address his critics — and, often, to agree with them.

**SPACING:** *It's probably safe to assume that a good chunk of Spacing's readers are familiar with you and your work, but for those who aren't, I imagine you have a fairly well-thought-out capsule description of the Creative City and the Creative Class ideas...*

**RICHARD FLORIDA:** The core of my work, and it's right in the beginning of [my book] *The Rise of the Creative Class*, it's in *Cities and the Creative Class*, it's in *The Flight of the Creative Class* — is that every single human being is creative, and the real challenge of our time is to harness their creative energy. Not just of the 30 — in Canada, 35 — percent of us who have the great good fortune to be members of the Creative Class. The real key to creating great cities is to tap and harness the creativity of every single human

being. And one of the things I have been thinking about a lot as the economic crisis has unfolded and hit those manufacturing cities across the world, is that it's going to be very hard to bring those manufacturing jobs back. So how can we create another set of good jobs?

Well my argument is [that] the way is to begin to transform the service economy — to engage those who work in hotels or landscaping or in retail shops, harness their creative energy, harness their innovation and continuous improvement. And I think the cities or places or spaces that can expand the creative economy and become more inclusive, they're going to be the real winners.

That's the main message I like to tell people: that every single human being is creative. It's not just about a creative elite, it's about expanding the boundaries of the creative society.

*There's a group in Toronto called Creative Class Struggle. They believe that the type of work you do "marginalizes youth, women, people of colour, immigrants and workers," and "represents the needs of corporations, governments, universities and scholars," by focusing on a "post-Fordist neo-liberalism" — I'm quoting from their website here.*

First of all, I welcome what they're trying to do. I would like to engage them. I would encourage them to engage me and engage us. I think I share their concerns. And I find it odd, though in a good way.

You know, for so much of my life I've been fighting a fight like that. I've been trying to elevate gay rights issues, trying to argue that immigrants are important, that the United States should stop restricting immigrants, that we should have more gay-friendly cities, that cities should be open and recognize the contributions of artists and creative people...

I very much share their concerns. I don't see myself as a neo-liberal corporate person. And I see myself sharing many of those same ideals. I mean my whole history, if you read my work — if they would go back and read my work — I think they would find that we're allies. But maybe not, and that's cool too.

I don't have an agenda, like a neo-liberal or a corporatist agenda, or any agenda. I just have an agenda about hopefully helping to make cities better, more

inclusive, more creative places that are better, more humanistic places. And I've had that since day one, so I don't think I've changed very much.

*I guess the challenge is, how do you, at the neighbourhood level, revitalize without gentrifying? How do you revitalize without marginalizing the poor? And at the city level, how do you build a whole creative city without squeezing out people with lower-income?*

The whole argument about inequality was supposed to be in *The Rise of the Creative Class*. The book got too long and it got moved to the subsequent book, *The Flight of the Creative Class*. The third section is all about rising inequality. And I pointed out...that the cities of the creative economy were the most unequal. So what was happening was that creative cities that had a high percentage of the Creative Class — that had lots of technology and arts — were not only becoming more different than other cities...but within those cities and regions inequality was the greatest.

Globalization, the rise of the knowledge-driven economy and all the things Jane Jacobs taught us, about the clustering of ambitious and entrepreneurial and innovative people is creating enormous socio-economic and geographic inequality. No one wants to talk about that. We are the first people to identify it, but policymakers simply do not want to talk about it.

At least [in Toronto], the mayor and the council will engage it; I've been fortunate enough to address them twice. And I think the Province [of Ontario] would too. In the United States, nobody wants to deal with it. They want it shoved under the rug, off the table. So we identified it and clearly pointed to it and said it would be the biggest challenge of our time...

Yes there's gentrification, yes our cities are becoming more unequal — well how do you stop that? The only way you stop that is to reward people's creativity. That's it. How else do you build a society which can be more equal, where each person can participate and generate some income and wealth?

That's the only way.

*What kind of things are we talking about? How do we invite marginalized groups into the creative city in practical and actual terms?*

You answered it. We must invite them into the

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**RICHARD FLORIDA**

“

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**RICHARD FLORIDA**

creative society.... We need a social contract, based upon rewarding each individual's creativity. I mean, this is what Marx talked about in terms of rewarding workers for their physical contribution. Not allowing the capitalists to take off all that surplus value and surplus product. Letting people be rewarded for the work they do. This isn't a hard thing to do but it's a political act. And I'm part of that, we're a part of that.... The bullet point in our report delivered to the premier of Ontario is we need a new social safety net for the creative age.

Do we go and specify every element of that? No. We say that's a political dialogue that involves all sides. We're talking to the unions about that, we're talking to activists about that, opening up the dialogue and then building an infrastructure for the creative economy. Not simply building roads, but investing in new kinds of infrastructure that can create this kind of connective fibre. So what we're trying to do is open up that debate so that more and more people can participate....

But I'm not...the mayor, I'm not a councillor, I'm not the premier, I'm not an MP. I'm trying to show the objective trends that are unfolding in society and point to areas where policymakers and activist groups should pay attention. I'm not trying to say, "here's the solution."

I learned that from Jane Jacobs. I asked Jane Jacobs in her house what she would do to help after 9/11 in Manhattan. She said, "You're asking the wrong question." And I kept asking her, "Well what would be your plan? What would you do?" She said, "I don't know. It's what the people who live in that neighbourhood would do, what the shop owners who have shops in that neighbourhood would do, what the people who work in that neighbourhood would do, and it has to be a more collective organic response."

So that's what I would say, that to solve these problems we have to empower the groups — immigrant groups, worker groups, labour groups, agricultural groups — and we have to bring them together in a framework that enables all of us to use our creativity to solve those problems. I'm not going to impose my values on those solutions.

*Spacing magazine is primarily concerned with public*

*spaces. And this is an area where I would really like to hear your thoughts. How vital are public spaces to the creative city?*

When I wrote *The Rise of the Creative Class*, something really struck me. I'd been going to Silicon Valley — I wrote a book on Silicon Valley in 1990 — but what struck me was, here is a place people held up as the best, most competitive, innovative place in the world. And there wasn't a public park. And I thought to myself: hold on, we could build public parks when we were relatively poor. Not terribly poor, but in the early industrial revolution in Toronto and New York and Chicago, we built these great public parks and public spaces. And now, in a society that's fabulously more wealthy, there's no public space at all; the public space is a freaking mall, right? It's a strip mall. And it just struck me, what had gone wrong....

Now we've done reasonably better in Toronto at having more public spaces, and I can see them, but my God — if we can't build public spaces, what have we got? We have no city. If we don't have a public realm, what the fuck do we have? We got nothing.

The logic of advanced capitalism is going to be to compact people. And this is really interesting, which most people who criticize sprawl don't get: actually what we created in the post-war era was not simply a sprawled city; it was at once a more extensive and intensive pattern of land-use development. We spread the boundaries of the city out, but we intensified land use. We had some pockets of holes and disinvestment. Now, we're expanding and intensifying land use development in a way that I never thought possible. Look at Toronto. We're just hacking and packing and packing people in, and then we're all going to need the public space much, much more, because there's going to be less opportunity than there was in the post-war era to have your little privatized patch. The future of Toronto is going to be one where the city's going to depend on the public realm, or else you are going to end up with a city that is terrifying.

*As we're talking, the fight over bike lanes on Jarvis is relatively recent. It seems like we're at a point in Toronto now where we're making slow progress on transit, bike lanes, and pedestrianization, but it's a real tooth-and-nail fight.*

You know one of the things I learned since I came here is that sustainability is an even bigger deal than I thought. I always knew it was important — in fact my earlier research on sustainability led me to write about creativity — but now I've realized how much a city is not just an urban environment. Duh, it's a natural environment.... Figuring out this balance between a city that works for the people, and a city that works for the natural environment is critical. I actually think we could lead on this. Toronto could lead the world on this, but...it's going to have to move quickly. The other thing I want to say is physical beauty matters. And I'm not saying that as a yuppie. Or as a person who wants to bourgeoisify the city.

When we did the Gallop survey for *Who's Your City* ...across class groupings — working class people, poor people, racial minorities — everybody said the physical green open-space environment was their 'number one' factor — more important than schools and crime and safety. Not that those weren't important. But a little bit higher than those was their 'number one' factor in how much they felt satisfied and loved their community. We have a lot to do there. We have taken this for granted.

*When urban ecologists describe an ideal urban ecosystem, they describe environmental and health benefits, but that often sounds like the type of city that urbanists celebrate too — reliable public transit, pedestrian areas, public spaces where people gather and get together and feel safe. Aren't those also the kind of things that drive a wonderful city, and not just environmental sustainability?*

So this exactly the kind of dialogue we had hoped that the Prosperity Institute — note I didn't call it the Creativity Institute...I came to that word "prosperity" for a specific reason. It has to be a shared prosperity. But I think creating this dialogue [about] this city, that it is a built environment and a natural environment and a real urban ecology, matters. It matters for health, for physical health....

Going back to the issue you raised earlier, I care about these problems in and of themselves. I would like a more just city. I would like a fairer city. I would like a more humane city, I would like a cleaner and more sustainable city. One of the things I learned the

hard way is — and call me a sell-out if you will — that if you make the argument that way, it's harder to get the attention of certain policymakers and business leaders. So what I did in *The Rise of the Creative Class* is I tweaked the narrative a little, and said no, if you do those things, those will be good for economic competitiveness, and for economic development.

I did that for two reasons: one, they are good for economic development, and two, even more importantly, they're good for social justice, they're good for diversity, they're good for a more humane and sustainable living environment. So, what we're finding out and we're documenting this factually — not just me, but our urbanistic community — is that investing in a greener community, a more diverse city, a city that values its art — not just its arts institutions but its working artists, that includes immigrants in the mix — that city gets extra productivity and extra innovation and extra economic wealth. We're trying to make an argument that's convincing. But I think those are all the things the city of the future will have to do. And I think Toronto has lagged on some of them. We are a diverse city, we treat gay and lesbian people well, but we have lagged on some of the quality of life issues and urban ecology issues for sure.

I don't think any city does it completely right, but I think, what we've always tried to say is cities do elements of it right, and right now [Toronto is] a very advanced city, so we're kind of in the leadership group.... I get a little bit upset when people say, "oh my God, Chicago has a nicer lakefront. We have all these horrible buildings, and ours doesn't look any good, we have the Gardiner." Yeah, okay. I understand we have big buildings there and a crappy highway, and I could bitch and moan about that, but there's got to be a way for us to use our water better.

*I always figured just leave the Gardiner where it is and build right up to it.*

We totally agree. I go down there, I look at it, I show my wife, she says it's a crappy thing, and I say, no. You can make anything great. Why take it down? Build right up to it, beautify it, put shops underneath it, whatever, put stalls underneath it, make it active and humanize it. I think that's what Jane Jacobs and others would have said. You can activate spaces with

human activity. You don't have to spend billions and billions to tear things down.... I often think that what makes cities great is this human activity. People want to be around human energy.

*You've often been accused of gushing about Toronto. What are a few things about Toronto — as compared to other cities — that you think are really worth bragging about?*

The difference [between Toronto and many American cities] is night and day. The fact that our banks are stable, is a big part.... The other thing is that we have health insurance and a social safety net. So we have a big opportunity now. As Canadians and Torontonians, we have an opportunity.

I don't think we'll overtake New York and London. But Toronto I think could define the next tier. Toronto has a real opportunity now to define what a great second city, really the world model of what a second city could be. And I think the most important thing that we can do there is stay open. The big threat to cities that have some downturns is that they close themselves down.

If we can say "come here, come here" — especially as the United States puts in a little more restriction and immigration declines — I think we have an enormous opportunity.

But I think we're weathering the [economic] crisis very well. It may be that there's a set of institutions, here which go well beyond banking, which are in some ways — and I'm not fawning — in some ways models of a fairer and more democratic and better form of capitalism. No, they are not the socialist nirvana. They are not perfectly fair and just. But they may be an evolution of the better and fairer kind of capitalism. It's worth looking at that....

*What would be the elements of the Toronto School of Urbanism?*

That cities are emerging. They're organic and they are emergent. And that they're the product of human energy.... That going back to Jane, that cities are not only our highest form of organization, but they are our first and best. That cities actually created agricultural development, and I think we realize that. What I've noticed in Toronto, which is amazing, whether

you're a civil engineer or a historian, or even a biologist, I've never talked to so many people who care about urban systems and urban ecology from so many walks of life. It's like Austin and Nashville are places that have music. LA has film. Toronto has urbanism. It's like what everybody cares about. And I think there's a Toronto school of urbanism that has a lot to say. I think the reason that I was invited here was that people thought I might fit in.

*In many ways Spacing's readership is sort of a microcosm of the Creative Class in Toronto. If you wanted to animate Toronto's Creative Class, what would you tell them?*

I think it's our obligation to lead. If we have the good fortune to be members of the Creative Class... I think we have an obligation to build a better city, and if we don't lead who will?

So it's not that the Creative Class has all the answers, but it does have that class position that Marx would have said is on the front lines of these changes. And especially young people — we owe it to ourselves to be less inward-looking, less me-oriented, less quote-unquote narcissistic. We owe it to the place.

So I think it's now time for this class and this generation to prove what we're made of. And that's what hopefully this whole institute can help do. What my role should be is to give voice to these issues, and open space for them in Toronto, Canada, and the world. What the Creative Class has to do is mobilize and think and talk and act, but not just for itself, and not just for its community, but to make a better, more balanced city — where each and every human being dares to create, and the creativity of each and every human being is fully valued and rewarded. And you know my hope is we'll get there. That's my hope. †

*Edward Keenan is a Spacing contributing editor and the senior editor of Eye Weekly.*



**SPACINGRADIO.CA** Look for our podcast interview with Richard Florida during the second season of Spacing Radio starting in September 2009

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