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Resilient economies, resilient cities: An interview with Richard Florida

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Lab Notes I: Trends from the New York Lab / Fast-Changing Citizenship



Richard Florida

If a citizen today must be flexible and adaptable to fast-changing environmental factors, so too must the economy that those citizens rely on for sustenance.

But if the development of an economy often requires massive amounts of long-term investment and planning, either on the part of the city or the citizen, what does a flexible, adaptable, fast-changing economy look like?

It's a question that has long marinated in my mind through my travels—from the artisan markets I patronized in Freetown, Sierra Leone, that relied heavily on the business of the international workers at the temporary UN Special Court, to the southern Ontario former steel town I lived in for a few months that was crumbling at its social seams due to industrial decline.

I've watched with the same trepid curiosity my home province of British Columbia, where logging, mining, and tourist industries boom and bust at the whim of the market's demand for copper, lumber . . . heck, even wine tours. The towns associated with them naturally follow suit and boom and bust as well.



Woodward Avenue, Detroit

But no citizen wants to live in a bust town, and over the past several years it's been shown that we can't rely on the stability of industries or other economic drivers that many of our cities and towns rely on. Thus, in a time of ever-increasing uncertainty, the question looms more pertinently than ever:

How do cities develop resilient economic systems that don't crash and leave them in the messes they have in the past? Is it possible to plan an urban economy that can easily adapt to constant change?

I recently put this question to one of the world's leading thinkers on both cities and economies, Richard Florida. Author of the international best sellers [*The Rise of the Creative Class*](#), [*Who's Your City?*](#), and, most recently, [*The Great Reset: How New Ways of Living and Working Drive*](#)

[*Post-Crash Prosperity*](#), Florida is also senior editor at *The Atlantic* and the brain behind their recent city-centered upstart [*The Atlantic Cities*](#).



Bagley-Clifford Office of the National Bank of Detroit

How can a city guard against future instability by developing an economy that is resilient and flexible to sudden change?

Since writing *The Great Reset*, I've been able to see for myself what I've long suspected: that Great Resets unfold not from top-down policies and programs, but gradually, as millions upon millions of people respond to challenging economic times by changing the way they live. We are starting to see that change, but we still have a long way to go in the current reset. That said, I believe generally we have to do three things to make our economy and cities more resilient.

First, to increase technological innovation, we need to make the core products of the industrial age—housing, cars, energy—cheaper if we want to fuel demand for the new technologies and industries of the future, from health care and biotechnology to new information, educational, and entertainment industries. By increasing the demand, we'll create a new market for innovative products and services. Cities can lead this charge by fostering the sectors and industries that are creating sustainable products for the future.

Second, to develop new systems and methods of innovation, we have to build a new infrastructure that adapts to the new realities of collaboration and creativity. We need new

infrastructure that can dramatically speed the movement of goods, people, and ideas. Cities need to lead the charge in advocating for more high-speed rail and a deeper, better digital backbone.

Third, our current system is failing to educate and train our workers for a creative economy, which requires individuals to think creatively and be innovative and flexible. Our future education system has to be more about leveraging the assets and capabilities of our future workers. The greatest challenge of our time—a challenge for nations, enterprises, and individuals—is to find ways to tap into every human’s creativity. To do this, our education system has to do more to spark the creativity inside our future workforce and ensure that students are driven down paths determined by their passions and natural skills. This will require a new way of thinking about education; we will have to experiment with new partnerships, models, and environments. As all research indicates, education and training cannot be a one-size-fits-all model. It must be individualistic, entrepreneurial, and innovative. Mayors are often the closest to local industry—more so than, say, state and national leaders; they need to be the ones helping to make a better connection between the private sector and education providers.

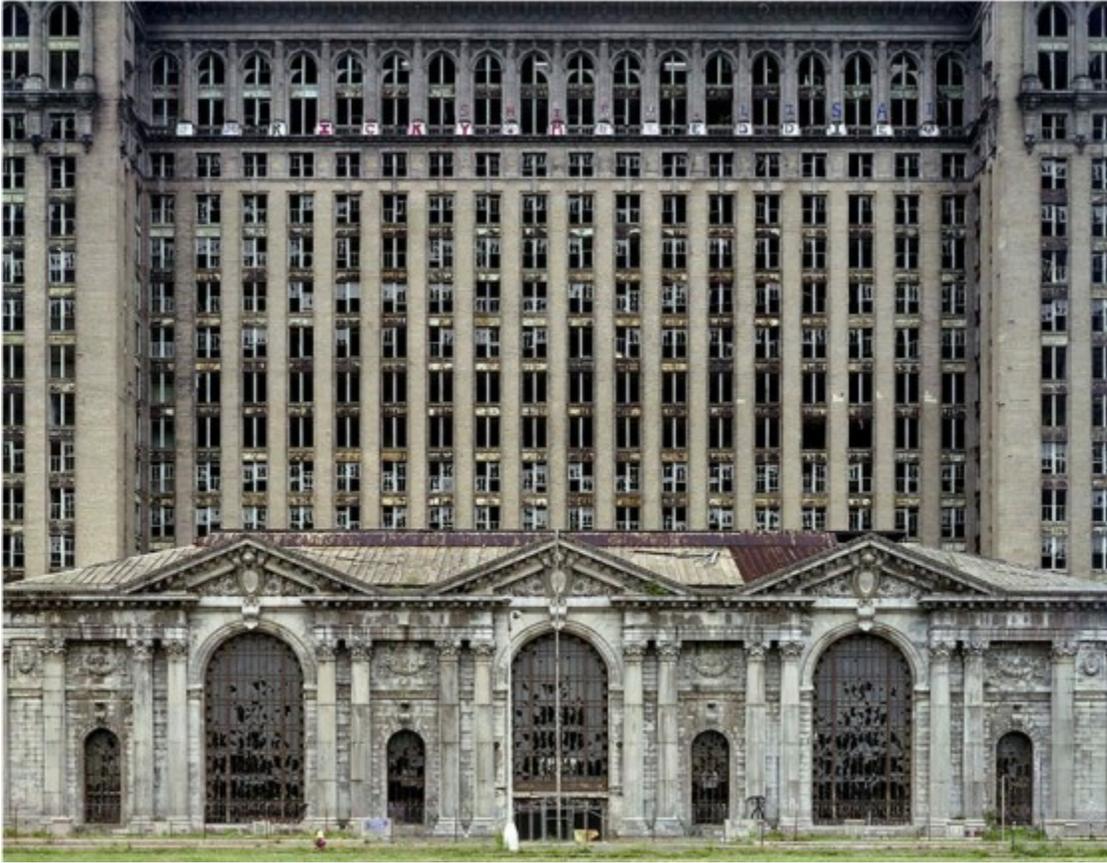


Packard Motors Plant, Detroit

If the economy changes, does this also require a different type of citizen? Does the worker need to change as well? If so, how?

I am not sure this requires a different type of citizen as much as it does a different way of life. In order to move beyond the current reset, on a personal level, we all have to define wealth and success differently and develop new approaches to consumption. Things that have always signified wealth and security—home ownership, new cars, luxury goods—have become a burden for many people. I expect they will be replaced by more experiential consumption, like travel

and recreation and self-improvement, thereby creating growth in other sectors and ultimately making us a happier society.



Michigan Central Station, Detroit

Is it possible, or safe, in this new economic era for a city's economy still to be based primarily on industry? Why or why not?

Cities should absolutely focus on their competitive assets and advantages. This may be one industry or it could be several. We know that, after this reset, we are going to see an even greater concentration of economic assets; this is why clustering is so important. The key will be continuing to innovate new technologies and models and maintain a climate and ecosystem that is appealing to creative-class workers. This includes fostering deep talent pools, a favorable regulation environment, and collaboration networks.



Fisher Body 21 Plant, Detroit

Right now, many brand new cities are being built from scratch around the world. So, too, are their economies. If we were to build a city economy from scratch, no retrofits required, specifically suited to adapting to rapid changes, what would it look like?

It would be a city that maximized what I call its 4-T's—technology, talent, tolerance, and territory assets. Even ten years after writing *The Rise of the Creative Class*, I still believe that the 4-T's provide the best blueprint for how cities can compete and prosper in the creative age.

Technology: Technology and innovation are critical components of a community's or an organization's ability to drive economic growth. To be successful, communities and organizations must have the avenues for transferring research, ideas, and innovation into marketable and sustainable products. Universities are paramount to this, and provide a key hub institution of the creative age.

Talent: The driving force behind any effective economic strategy is talented people. We live in a more mobile age than ever before. People, especially top creative talent, move around a lot. A community's ability to attract and retain top talent is the defining issue of the creative age.

Tolerance: Economic prosperity relies on cultural, entrepreneurial, civic, scientific, and artistic creativity. Creative workers with these talents need communities, organizations, and peers that

are open to new ideas and different people. Places receptive to immigration, alternative lifestyles, and new views on social status and power structures will benefit significantly in the creative age.

Territory Assets: More than ever before, place matters. Territory assets are the natural, built, and psychological settings of the community. It is the distinct “vibe” that makes communities unique from one another. People want to live in communities that are unique and inspiring to them.

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Photograph of Richard Florida courtesy of the Creative Class Group. All other photography from The Ruins of Detroit by Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, 2005–10; reproduced with permission. <http://www.marchandmeffre.com/index.html>. On exhibition at Wilmotte Gallery, Lichfield Studios, London, February 24–April 5, 2012.

Lab Notes I is an eight-week series focusing on trends that emerged from the BMW Guggenheim Lab New York. Curators Maria Nicanor and David van der Leer, blogger Christine McLaren, and a prominent group of guest contributors will explore the forces and transformations shaping the future of cities. The series will focus on four successive trends; the third is Fast-Changing Citizenship.

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