

Beached M I A M I

Brain Circulation and Miami's future as a Start-Up City

By [Jordan Melnick](#) | February 10th, 2013 | [5 Comments](#)



Organized by influential urbanist and author Richard Florida (pictured), Start-Up City: Miami will feature talks by Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh and AOL co-founder Steve Case on Wednesday, Feb. 13. — *photo by Jaime Hogge*

The narrative of Miami's ongoing transformation comprises various story lines, including, most prominently, the burgeoning of its artist community and cultural offerings (as chronicled in the recently released documentary [Rising Tide](#)). There's also the less prominent stories of its increasingly vibrant music scene — attested to by our list of [the Top 50 South Florida Songs of 2012](#) — and its surprisingly rich bike culture (surprising because our sprawled-out, car-centric city would seem utterly inhospitable to bike travel — and, in fact, [it can be](#).)

But, to me, the most surprising story line is Miami's fledgling tech industry. Consider [The Next Web's recent blog post](#), "Awesome Offices: Inside 8 fantastic start-up workplaces in Miami" — who knew there were *two* such places, let alone eight? And it's not as if these "awesome" workplaces are sitting empty. There's the web-as-TV start-up [Gui.de](#) working out of a Midtown duplex, the expert video chat platform [LiveNinja](#) running from a Wynwood office, and the online music-streaming service [Senzari](#) operating in Brickell. Also in Wynwood is [The LAB Miami](#), a 10,000-square-foot space that recently hosted a [Wayra](#) hackathon.

Of course, despite these green shoots, Miami is no Silicon Valley. But these promising first steps conjure a future in which the city takes its place alongside San Francisco, New York, Boston, and the other tech hubs as an urban incubator of innovative technology and game-changing ideas. With an eye on that future, urban studies expert and part-time Miami resident Richard Florida partnered with The Atlantic (where he is a senior editor) and the Knight Foundation to organize [Start-Up City: Miami](#), “a forum that will bring together leading entrepreneurs and tech experts for a series of conversations about Miami’s innovation ecosystem.” Hosted at the New World Center on Wednesday, February 13, the event will “feature a series of roundtable discussions and one-on-one interviews with top voices from the tech, design, urban planning, and start-up communities, including Tony Hsieh, CEO of Zappos, and Steve Case, co-founder of AOL.” Though registration for the event is now closed (it reached audience capacity), [you can live stream the programming online](#).

Ahead of Start-Up City: Miami, I met with Florida, author of several influential books, including 2002's *The Rise Of The Creative Class*, to discuss what Miami needs to do to transcend the (outdated) fun-and-sun stereotype and become a global ideas capital. Here is an edited transcript of our conversation.

To start, put the term “start-up” in context. Are you talking about a Silicon Valley-style tech industry?

Florida: When I wrote *The Rise of the Creative Class* and I identified these three Ts — technology, talent, and tolerance — I said cities that did all three had an economic edge. And I said that’s Silicon Valley, Austin, Boston, Seattle, on and on. And I used Pittsburg as an example of a city that had great technology but lacked tolerance and talent. And I used Miami, in that book, as an example of a city that was tolerant in lifestyle but lacked technology.

So I think technology’s been the missing piece of the puzzle here. And the idea was, and I think still is, could we leverage the ongoing, now very advanced urban transformation of not only South Beach, which is quite mature, but also the Design District, Wynwood, Midtown — that urban strip along Biscayne Boulevard — could we leverage those ongoing trends to incubate technology along two dimensions? One, my own work suggested that technology start-ups have always and increasingly are gravitating away from suburban office parks to funky urban districts that have artistic and musical innovation. And, two, Jane Jacobs’ notion that new ideas require old buildings.

So the idea was, could we stimulate this environment both by drawing in people from that environment but also by bringing in really interesting people like Steve Case, Tony Hsieh, the folks from the [Center for an Urban Future](#) [in New York], the folks from the London School of Economics, Brad Feld, venture capitalist from Boulder, Colorado, who wrote this book *Startup Communities* — could we put those pieces together and engage a conversation about, does Miami have what it takes to be [a start-up city]?

My interest ... is to make Miami part of a global conversation about city building, placemaking, technology-based urban development. I think a great city needs to be part of that conversation. You know, we have this great airport that get you anywhere in Europe, Latin America, connects

you to the world. We have these great art galleries and art festivals that bring people here. But in terms of ideas, we're just not on the map.

In Miami, we talk a lot about the “brain drain”, where we lose talented people to places like New York and Los Angeles —

Florida: The overriding concept I like is “brain circulation”. It's not brain drain, it's not brain gain, it's brain circulation. So what I think Miami should do is bring people in and send people out. The more people who go out and say, “Miami is this amazing laboratory for urban transformation, and I thought it was fabulous,” the better for Miami. My hope would be that some of those people figure out a way to incubate start-ups [in Miami]. Not just high-tech start-ups — social innovation, social enterprise, urban transformation, arts and cultural organizations.

I like the Aspen model ... They were able to transform a tourist town and a skiing town into an intellectual place [through the [Aspen Ideas Festival](#)]. They were able to take a music and ideas festival and create an intellectual ambiance around it. Not all of the fellows or participants stay there all year — some come for a week, some stay there for three months. But it creates an intellectual vibrancy that magnifies. And I thought, that's what we can do in Miami.

I think there's a lot to build on in Miami. The question then is, how do we build those idea-capital institutions. Miami did it with arts and culture, they did it with museums, they've done it with [food] — the one place we haven't done it is in the realm of ideas. So I just think it takes a little bit of a catalyst. I don't want to run this, I don't want to own this, I want to be part of it. And I think once it gets catalyzed, it will come together pretty quickly. And I think it should be multinational with an eye on Latin and South America. I don't think it should be Latin and South America exclusive. The fact that we have so many Europeans, so many Russians, so many people from the Middle East and Russia now here — I think it can become a place that is a reflection of the new global multi-dimensional economy, focused around real estate, focused around development, focused around arts and culture.

The concept of brain circulation is very interesting because we tend to harp on the “drain” part of the cycle.

Florida: I just look at the people I know that are choosing to live here. The net in is better than the net out. So I think Miami is winning. It's really quite amazing, our ability to do brain circulation, and I think we minimize that. We look at every young person who leaves as a big loss, instead of saying, “They're going out, they're getting skills, they're learning the world, and we're attracting a lot of people.” There are very few regions in the world that have this net in that we do.

It's clear that you have strong faith in Miami's ability to become an ideas capital, but what challenges lie ahead?

Florida: We have a very small knowledge-based professional creative class. Not only are we a canonical post-industrial metropolis, but we don't have a big working class of mid-skill jobs. When I look at Washington, D.C., it has almost 50 percent of its workforce in the creative class

and about 40 percent in the service class. We're the opposite. Miami has about 60 percent in the service class and about 25 percent in the creative class. So on the one hand we have to boost up our knowledge/professional/technical/creative class. No doubt.

But the big challenge is ... our service workers do not make a lot of money. They're falling further and further behind economically. So what I challenge people here is ... to really upgrade our service class. And with the hotels and the restaurants — with the service infrastructure we have here, I think this is a very powerful laboratory for creatifying, adding knowledge, professionalizing, and creating better career cycles in the service class.

And the other missing piece of the puzzle is, we are so far behind on transit. I mean, the level of car dependence in this region is mind bending. My own research suggests that you can get away with that at two-and-a-half million people. You can get away with it at three million people. Once you get past three-and-a-half million — and now we're at five million — you need to have a transit infrastructure. Part of that is bike and pedestrian friendliness. I see so many people riding bikes, and you're taking your life in your hands. So many people on scooters, but it's still treacherous. We need a transit infrastructure.

But I think it's easy. It's easy to put in the bike lane infrastructure. We have to tame the cars. We have to condition people that they have to treat cyclists like human beings. That's a project for our country. When you go to Copenhagen or Amsterdam, you see how it works, that it can work. I'll tell you though: I think Toronto is less bike-friendly than Miami, and New York is not a biker's paradise. I just think with our weather and the number of cyclists and bike activists, we can do it.

But more than that [the bike infrastructure], we need the transit. If you imagine the region 20 years from now, with high-speed rail connecting our major metro centers and transit [throughout Miami], it would be a different place.

To improve our transit system, we need the local government to get on board — do you see that happening?

Florida: Look, we need a commitment to city building, and that has to leverage not just the mayor and the county — it has to leverage public-private partnerships. One of the great things about America, which I learned living in Canada, is that what makes our cities great is the public-private partnerships.

So I think we need a commitment to city building, and that's why I like the idea of an ideas center, working with this urban laboratory. We need real experts, professionals, amateur city builders articulating a vision of the city. Not a vision of Miami with a casino next to a museum without transit with an airport disconnected from the city. We need a strategy that's economic development, spurring competitive advantage, and putting the pieces of transit, infrastructure, and placemaking together. I think this is the great challenge of our time: How do we develop tools, best practices, information systems, technologies that enable better city building and city leadership? And we need to do some of that here, and I think we should do it.

Is our traditional focus on tourism a problem?

Florida: No, tourism is a huge asset because it gives you flux, it gives you people, it gives you a market. It lets you borrow size. Tourism gives you this other market that you otherwise wouldn't have, for restaurants and all sorts of arts and cultural activities. We need a strategy that leverages tourism and residents and second-home owners and makes a better region for everybody.

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