

Jimi Hendrix and the future of North Texas

BY ROBERT FRANCIS
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Purple haze all in my brain

Lately things don't seem the same

'Purple Haze.' Jimi Hendrix

What does a long-departed psychedelic rock guitar god from Seattle have to teach North Texas about its economic future?

Quite a lot, to hear urban theorist Richard Florida talk.

Florida, who spoke Sept. 25 at the University of Texas at Arlington as the first of the school's 2009 Maverick Speaker Series, is best known for his concepts of the creative class and the idea of urban regeneration and several books on the subject, including *The Rise of the Creative Class*, *Cities and the Creative Class* and his latest, *Who's Your City?* He currently is the director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management and founder of an advisory firm, the Creative Class Group.

From what Florida said, Fort Worth might start paying more attention to the local arts community. And that means more than dropping a couple of quarters in an open guitar case as someone sings "Freebird" or sipping wine on Gallery Night.

Florida said he believes the driving force behind a strong economy for an area is directly related to the talent pool available in that area. We live in, not in the "information age," but the "creative age," he said. Florida's idea of the creative class is not limited to beret-wearing artists, musicians and writers sipping coffee in torn blue jeans – though they have their place. He includes scientists, entrepreneurs, engineers and computer programmers, among others in his definition.

"The challenge of our time is to unleash the creative spark, to stoke the creative furnace that lies deep within every single human being," Florida told the audience.

Florida sort of stumbled across his theory. Early in his career, while working at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Florida worked with the then-economically ravaged city in an effort at revitalization.

After building a strong technology base, Florida and other economic development officials thought they had a winner: Lycos, then a strong search engine competitor to upstart Yahoo! With the backing of area universities and a clear technological winner in Lycos, Pittsburgh looked to be on its way to becoming a bona fide player in the growing high-tech industry.

Then, while teaching a semester at Harvard, Florida was shocked when he opened the Boston paper to discover that Lycos was moving to Boston.

“That headline changed my life,” he said, proving the power of the press.

After a flurry of phone calls, Florida learned that Lycos was not moving because Boston was a cheaper place to locate a company. Boston was where the high-tech talent was.

Florida’s theory was born: “The driving force behind any effective economic development or business strategy is talented people...A community’s ability to attract and retain top talent is the defining issue of the creative age.”

I haven’t read Florida’s books, but his theory seem to co-exist neatly with the ideas of urban planner guru William H. Whyte who studied how people live in urban settings and contributed significantly to the current urban revival.

Since his light bulb moment, Florida has further developed his theory. He has a concept of three T’s or three components most important to creating a city or metropolitan area that can attract and keep the kind of talent needed. The three T’s are: Technology, Talent and Tolerance. The North Texas area, when compared with another 350 metropolitan areas, does pretty well, scoring a seven for technology, 17 for talent and 23 for tolerance.

“Not bad,” Florida said, though he noted there was room for improvement.

The technology rating should resonate well with the UT-Arlington officials in attendance. UT-Arlington, along with the University of Texas at Dallas and the University of North Texas, has made a serious commitment to becoming a Tier One research university. And, to use evidence of the Business Press’ own Research Texas publication, Texas is making great strides in developing as a technology leader.

But it’s not all technology and research that makes an area successful in the “creative age,” as Florida’s Hendrix anecdote made clear.

Florida told the students a story about visiting Seattle’s downtown area 10 years ago and seeing the signs of revitalization with small art galleries and small businesses, including, he noted, “what must have been the first Starbucks ever built.”

He also noticed a new, odd-looking structure under construction. It was a gift from Paul Allen, co-founder of Microsoft Corp., Seattle officials explained.

Florida wondered what it was Allen was so passionate about: Was it a museum to the area's high-tech industry, a tribute to Albert Einstein, Thomas Edison, someone who had influenced Allen in his development of technological giant Microsoft? Was it a new school for entrepreneurship?

No, it turned out it was a building designed by then-little known Frank Gehry for the Experience Music Project, a tribute to Allen's inspiration, Jimi Hendrix. Gehry's style befits Hendrix's creativity, using what is known as "deconstructivism" to create buildings that look unfinished and depart from structural norms with swooping angles and unusual textures.

"This African-American musician who grew up in poverty in Seattle,...who used effects pedals to create a new sound, who built his own studio, Electric Ladyland in New York, so he could create the sounds he heard in his head, that was his inspiration," Florida said.

"You think the artist influences the artist, the businessman influences the businessman, but that's not the way it works," Florida said. "Creative energy is the thing that brings us all together and it's the core."

The technology North Texas is developing remains key to our future – no doubt – but we would be well-served not to forget to add a little Purple Haze to the mix.

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