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INTERVIEW

RICHARD FLORIDA

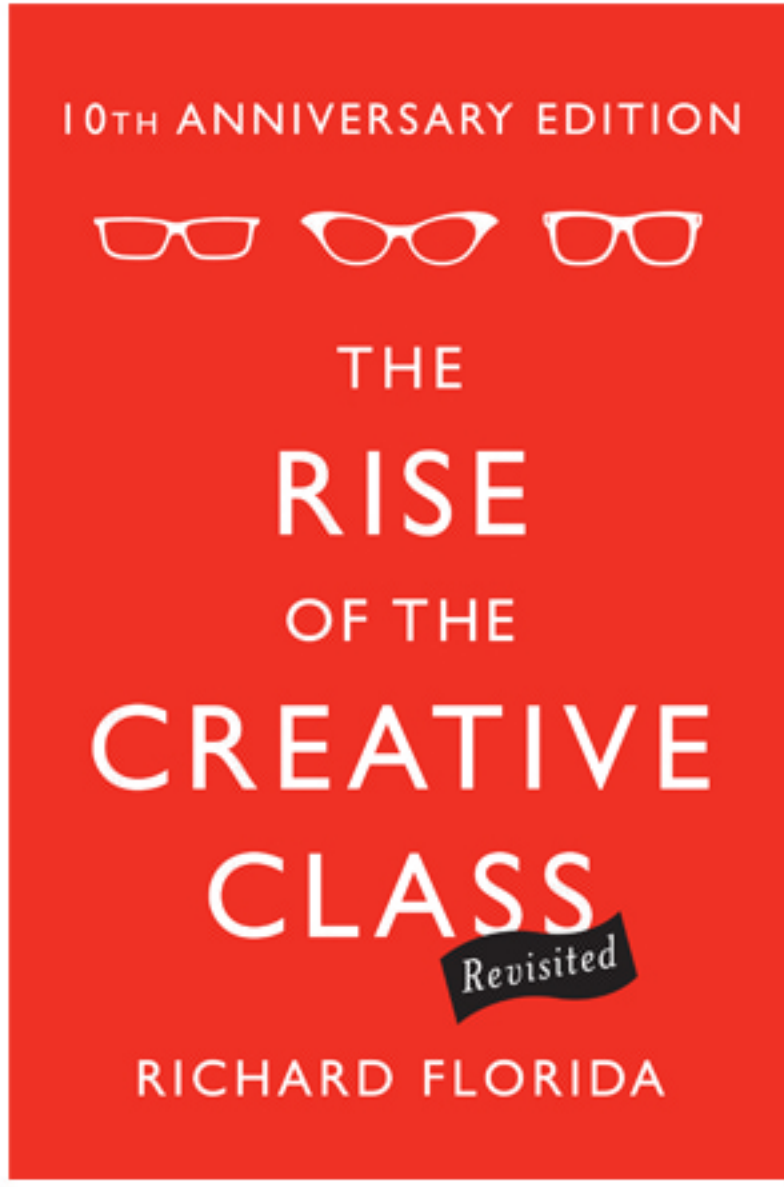
Are successful cities built on their creative workers? Urban theorist Richard Florida talks to Caroline Kinneberg.

Richard Florida has been dubbed an “academic rock star” (*Fast Company*) and one of the world’s most influential thinkers (*MIT Technology Review*). He talks about the revitalisation of cities from Pittsburgh to Mexico City, how the “creative class” is fuelling the world economy — and why urban regeneration isn’t all good.

US-born urbanist Richard Florida pegged an emerging social change in 2002 in his bestseller *The Rise of the Creative Class* — and with the hipster aesthetic now seemingly dominant, a wealth of laptop-dotted coffeehouses and words like “idea economy” buzzier than ever, it seems his theory was right on the money. Today the NYU professor, director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at University of Toronto and senior editor at *The Atlantic* also connects brands from BMW to Le Méridien with the creative class at Creative Class Group, the consultancy he founded.

In The Rise of the Creative Class, you identified a new socioeconomic group. Who exactly is in it?

The creative class includes people who work in science and technology, arts and culture, business management and the professions. This class makes up between a third and half of the workforce in advanced nations and much more than that in great cities. It is the leading economic and trendsetting force in our economy and society.



Florida's 2002 bestseller.



Florida talking at the Smart City Expo in Barcelona 2013

Why is this term so relevant now?

Simply put, the creative class is the main engine of future economic growth. These are the thinkers, leaders, innovators, influencers and entrepreneurs who are pushing the cultural and commercial envelope – developing, designing and marketing the newest products and services. Likewise, creative-class members are often the first adopters of those same products and services because of their high levels of income. In the United States, the creative class comprises only one-third of the workforce but it has a disproportionate economic impact, controlling half of all wages and income and about three-quarters of discretionary spending.

How are creatives revitalizing cities?

It is quite simple: as the economy has shifted from a production-based model to one that is driven by ideas, creativity and innovation, the creative class matters more than ever. Human brainpower and creativity is the key input in today’s economy. If factories were the organising principle of the industrial age, cities are the central organising unit of the new creative economy. Creatives cluster in great cities, because that’s where the most stimulating people are – where they can compete and collaborate with each other and launch cutting-edge technologies and enterprises.

We can see the impact of this in many neighbourhoods and cities across the world. Pittsburgh, once an industrially-based city, has built a twenty-first-century economy around its great medical and educational institutions and is now ranked as one of the most liveable cities in the world. East London’s Shoreditch has undergone a massive revitalisation as technology and creative firms have located there. Mexico City’s La Condesa and Roma neighbourhoods have become home to the creative class, helping to transform the entrepreneurial economy in one of the world’s largest megacities.



A pedestrian pathway in Colonia Condesa, Mexico City. Credit: © Wendy Connert/robertharding/Corbis



Mercado Roma in Mexico City. Credit: © Adam Wiseman/Corbis



The skyline in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Credit: © Ken Redding/Corbis



In the East London neighbourhood of Shoreditch. Credit: © Stuart Freedman/In Pictures/Corbis

While migration back to cities is creating great opportunities, it’s also creating great challenges – rising inequality, gentrification and unaffordability and worsening economic segregation



What cities should we be keeping our eyes on at the moment? And what can cities do to draw creative talent?

That’s a tough question. Many cities all over the world are making great strides in improving their standing of place and knowledge-based industries. I’d be looking at places that are working to improve their ranking on what I call the 3Ts of economic development – Technology, Talent and Tolerance. Technology and innovation are critical components of a city’s ability to drive economic growth. Talented people are absolutely key, and the communities that they are most drawn to are tolerant of new ideas and different kinds of people.

You’re a member of the UN’s Digital Technologies for Sustainable Urbanization Network. Are creative cities more sustainable?

Absolutely. Creative cities are built on knowledge sectors, which tend to be cleaner, greener and more sustainable. The creative class expects their communities to be good stewards.

What’s more, many of the economic forces in cities – the concentration of assets, for example – will require us to evaluate our choices and needs more holistically. Creatives have shown a marked preference for denser, more compact and walkable communities with lively street scenes. Densification and mixed use will help revitalise our suburbs as well.

You’re wrapping up the final draft of your book The New Urban Crisis (out in the UK in April 2017). Could you give us a preview of what it’s about?

It will explore the good and the bad sides of our ongoing urban revival. While migration back to cities is creating great opportunities, it’s also creating great challenges – rising inequality, gentrification and unaffordability and worsening economic segregation. The creative economy is a rising tide, but it’s not lifting all the boats – blue-collar and service workers are actually worse off in many places, and there is a hard core of multigenerational poverty that remains untouched. My book will outline a new model of urban growth and a set of policies that can help make our cities more inclusive and resilient.