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Richard Florida to Lexington: It really is all about quality of life

by Tom Martin

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Throughout and since his successful campaign for Lexington mayor, Jim Newberry has cited the writings of urban studies theorist Richard Florida, whose best-selling *Rise of the Creative Class* has contributed to a surge of urban revitalization efforts from coast to coast.

Mayor Newberry lately has urged anyone within earshot to read Florida's most recent work, *Who's Your City?*, a book exploring and contesting the notion that in a global economy, where you live no longer matters.

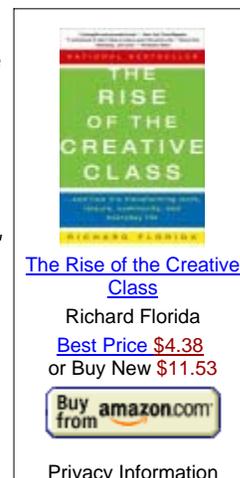
Mayor Newberry was invited to join Business Lexington's Tom Martin in a telephone discussion with Florida that can be heard by clicking on the podcast below.

JN: Rich, you indicated in your book that you and Tom Friedman (author of *The World is Flat*) have slightly different views on whether or not the world is "flat." Could you tell me just a little bit about your concept of "spikey" globalization?

RF: Well, I think Freeman has done everyone a useful service. I actually don't totally disagree with him. I'd say he's got half of the equation absolutely right. ... Simple manufacturing tasks are moving offshore to low-cost destinations. Even in information and software, some of the things that can be boiled down to basic services are moving to places like India. ... For the first time in human history, this past year more than 50 percent of the people on the face of the earth live in urban locations — they have moved from farms, from rural areas, from villages. Moreover, when we were able to actually compile information on where economic activity in the world is located, and we did that by looking at the satellite images of the world at night and using those as measures of economic activity, what we found is there are about 40 mega-regions in the world economy, these big giant economic conglomerations like the Boston, New York, Washington corridor, greater London or greater Tokyo or the area that stretches from Charlotte to Atlanta, and many, many others. Forty of these mega-regions, which house just about 18 percent of the world population, produce more than two-thirds of our economic output and about nine in 10 of all innovations. So, as the world globalizes and new countries come on stream — China and India and Southeast Asia and Latin America — we aren't moving to a flat world; we're moving to a world where there are peaks of globalization, where these very, very big urban agglomerations and concentrations where the world's work in economic activity and even more so, innovation, go on. So, as the world becomes more global, it doesn't just flatten out — it actually becomes very spikey. So these mega-regions are like the "mountain ranges" of the world economy.

TM: So we're reorganizing around this regional concept?

RF: During the old mass production economy ... suburbanization was the geography that really mattered. What's happening today as we move to what I called in my previous work a "creative economy," we're getting a new global geography which is organized around these combinations of cities. It doesn't mean that you won't have suburbs. It doesn't mean that there won't be rural areas that are connected, but I think what's happening is that fewer regions are becoming powerhouses, about 40 worldwide. And our population worldwide is becoming more concentrated in those regions. ... What we're talking about is no longer cities that exist in isolation or even cities and suburbs that exist in isolation, but it's the relationships between a number of cities in a mega-region. But also, and I think very importantly, it's the relationships between that mega-region and the country and the world, which become the key focal point for growth, and I mean for any city. For Lexington, it means how do you connect to the regions around you and how do you connect out to the world economy? That's the key for your future.



TM: Our local chamber, Commerce Lexington, has over many years led large groups of the city's business, political, and civic leaders on trips to various cities to study their ideas and challenges. The most recent, Boulder and then Austin, have left us with some cautionary tales: as housing becomes less affordable the very groups that powered downtown development are finding themselves priced out of those very same markets. And this is a very important thing for us to understand here right now as we enter into a very energetic revitalization of our downtown. We're wondering if you could offer any insights into the problem.

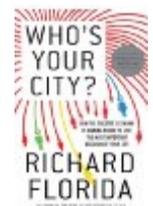
RF: I'm a big fan of Lexington, and I think you've picked places that are very interesting because, like Boulder and Austin, Lexington too is one of those places where the brains are. It has, for its size, an astonishingly high concentration of the creative class. And it's very interesting; if you're not one of the New Yorks and Londons of the world, the next best position to be in is to be like a Lexington and an Austin and a Boulder — lots of brain capital, lots of university talent, quite livable, almost, if you will, naturally sustainable without trying too hard, very green, very desirable. And for the second tier cities, whether that's Cleveland or Lexington, Austin or Pittsburgh, quality matters. So the quality of your talent, the quality of your brains, the quality of your lifestyle and living environment are going to really be what separates the winners from the losers, and Lexington is a winner there. Another thing I like about Lexington, ... in a previous life back in the 1980s, I studied high-performance manufacturing, and I made many, many, many pilgrimages to the area on the periphery of Lexington, which has seen this migration of Toyota and Toyota style and Toyota supplier manufacturing. What I like about your region is that it has the brains, but it also manages to have these very high-powered creative manufacturing jobs. I think the real challenge for places that are attracting the brains ... partly because they are attracting highly ambitious, highly talented, highly innovative people, (is that) they are experiencing the greatest level of social and economic inequalities. ... So what I would like to see Lexington embrace is an economy that's fully creative across the board, where not just artists and techies can win, but where people who work in manufacturing can see their jobs upgraded, but also importantly, people who work in the service economy can be part of the mix, because I don't think the Austin and Boulder solution, for all their good things, are by any means ideal. We need a place where every single resident can feel that they are a part of the solution and that they can have a go.

JN: In *Who's Your City*, you talk a lot about the fact that each city has its own type of personality. As someone who is familiar with Lexington but who doesn't live here, I would be interested in your assessment of what sort of personality Lexington has.

RF: ... Sometimes we get involved in this false comparison between urbanism and naturalism — between urban, concrete, hipster, nightlife living, and outdoor parks and recreation. I think what people are searching for is a mixture of urbanism and naturalism. People are looking for a city that has nice restaurants. They don't have to be expensive, fancy restaurants, but some places they can go with their family, to a street side café and feel the urban energy, where they can hear music even if that's street buskers or go to a park and enjoy that as an outing. Clean water, clean air and great parks came up number one in our Gallup survey as what people truly desire — even ahead of great schools and low crime, not that those weren't very important. But I think Lexington can offer this combination of naturalism and urbanism in a way that is very accessible to people. My book talks about the different personalities that cluster in communities. Now, I haven't been able to drill down into Lexington per se, but ... if you look at a town with the demographic profile of Lexington — university types, people who are artists, musicians, what a fantastic music scene growing up in the whole general region in your part of the world — I would think that for your state, you have a lot of "open-to-experience" types. We certainly find a ton of them in Austin, one of your benchmark communities. And those open-to-experience types are very useful, even though they seem a little quirky, even though they seem a little odd. They're like the professor who wore that beret or the artist who couldn't quite fit into their hometown. The thing about these open-to-experience types is they're the kinds of people who come up not with just a new art idea or a new musical sound, they're also the kinds of people who are very, very likely to be innovators technologically and entrepreneurs. And communities where there is a little bit of a minority or a substantial grouping of them also have the ability to attract other open-to-experience types. ... So it seems to me that Lexington has a lot of conscientious people, a lot of agreeable people, but also (people who are) open-to-experience. One of my friends, a psychologist, said, 'Rich, if you want to build a successful business, for every one of these great entrepreneurs and innovators that you talk about, you need at least 10 more conscientious people to work with them to turn them into something.' So I think in Lexington's personality, in its DNA, it has all the right ingredients for long-term success.

JN: Towards the end of *Who's Your City*, you talk about the fact that it is imperative for cities to attract young people right as they begin their careers, rather than trying to adopt a strategy of re-attracting them after they have gone elsewhere for a few years. Why is that so important?

RF: ... The people who are most likely to move in the United States are the young people. People 24 and 25 are the most likely to move. They're anywhere from three times more likely than a 40-year-old, to five times more likely than a 50-year-old and seven to 10 times more likely than a 60-year-old. So if you're playing this game as a community of attracting them back when they are 35, you have a losing proposition, because two to three times less people move at that age. So what's happening is, those places that are attracting lots of people after college are getting an enormous advantage. Yes, many of those kids will leave; yes, many of those kids will find it won't be the place they'll want to raise their kids and they'll want to move somewhere else. But at the end of the day, they are going to have an advantage. So in my view, Lexington is a place that should take advantage of this right now. Attracting those kids and nailing them down after they leave college is going to provide benefits not only over their life course but for generations to come.



[Who's Your City?](#)

Richard Florida

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