

Soul and the city

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Advertisement

RICHARD Florida lives and breathes cities. He gets paid to analyse them, and when he's not working he's thinking about them. They are his bread and butter, his *raison d'être*. They are his life's work and the love of his life.

Such an all-consuming urban obsession might sound like the posturing of the 21st-century hipster, but it is pro forma stuff for the author of a book called *Who's Your City?*. The question, you will note, is not the more conventional where, or even what. The "who?" is the gateway to Florida's mission, which is to make us think about place as a living, breathing thing. A life partner, if you will.

Because Florida — social theorist, geographer, urban planner and guru of the globalisation debate — believes the place we choose to live has more of a bearing on future success and happiness than the more micro-level decisions of career and relationships.

Florida, who went from obscure academic to an authority on global development with *The Rise of the Creative Class* — his bestselling 2002 book arguing that in a so-called "knowledge era" it was creative people rather than business or government that brought money into a city or region — is back. This time he is taking globalisation by the horns with the paradoxical theory that as the world becomes "flatter" via developments in technology, it also becomes "spikier", creating a series of geographically based peaks and valleys of economic prosperity and disadvantage. Taking square aim at flat-earth exponents, such as *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, who believes "you can innovate without having to emigrate", Florida counters that today's global economy is powered by a surprisingly small number of locations. And you have to be in it, he argues, to win it.

Those familiar with the Florida oeuvre, including his 2005 bestseller, *The Flight of the Creative Class*, will recognise his trademark mixture of futurism, sociology and psychology, with an overlay of human cartography and the elements of a self-help manual.

"Place remains the central axis of our time — more important to the world economy and our individual lives than ever before," he writes. "The place we choose to live affects every aspect of our being. It can determine the income we earn, the people we meet, the

friends we make, the partners we choose, and the options available to our children and our families."

It's a sometimes curious tome, the triumphalist geographic sweep for the mobile "haves" corresponding sharply with its dystopian flip-side for the stuck "have-nots" and peppered with hints on how to best choose where to live ("do your homework"; "what are your values?").

The emphasis on place might be a no-brainer for a man whose recent shift to Canada to head Toronto University's Prosperity Institute takes to 17 the number of moves in his adult life ("but only between eight cities; and I really would like to stop moving", he says). But he acknowledges that many people are cemented to one location by the inertia of family, friends, familiarity and fear.

"I don't think most people make an informed decision. Some people do, but I think that's really a minority, and reflecting back on my own life I think I moved primarily for access to work. I didn't have this kind of framework set out for me," he says.

Resembling a kind of corporate Lou Reed, Florida is a polished performer with a seemingly limitless supply of media-friendly soundbites ("quote, unquote" is one of his favourite sayings). His pop-friendly theories have been an entry ticket to territory previously uncharted by urban economists, such as the satirical *Colbert Report*.

Critics might occasionally accuse the loquacious 50-year-old, who has a PhD in city and regional planning, of presenting a glib veneer to compensate for some flawed reasoning, but he continues to defy the image of the grey academic by trotting out his own story to illustrate his theories. It's the classic rags-to-riches narrative: born in Newark, New Jersey, to working-class, first-generation Italian-American parents, he witnessed the area's decline in his teenage years, which were spent partly in the library reading books on urban planning, and partly hanging out with a tough-guy peer group increasingly into petty crime and drugs.

His parents moved twice in their lives: after marriage, when they moved out of their parents' homes into their own apartment, and again when they bought a house in the same neighbourhood. Florida, who was practically the only member of his extended clan to move more than 30 kilometres from home, suffered under the weight of family disapproval when he decided it was necessary to move away to college rather than attend the local school his parents had chosen.

"My parents were happy, but they were rooted. I was mobile," he says. "But had it not been for my geographic mobility, I would never have been able to attend graduate school, and ultimately become a professor and author.

"What I learned in all this was that in order to achieve economic mobility in this society, unless you're really fortunate and are born into a place that really fits your career, you

have to move. It's a tough choice, but what I'm saying to young people in particular is, you've got to be conscious of this."

He met his wife of two years, Rana, while giving a speech in Detroit, an area he happily points out has statistically more single women than men. "Her employer asked her to come to my speech, and I approached her and asked if she wanted me to sign her book. The irony was, the conference was held by the governor of Michigan and he was trying to keep people from leaving the area."

The creative class theory, which provides the foundation stone for *Who's Your City?*, is flattering stuff to the ears of almost all of those who have encountered it. Critics have picked holes in it for its broad designation of "creatives" — a generous 38% of the US population, Florida would have it, encompassing anyone with a tertiary degree, to managers, business people, and employees in the financial sector.

And while the philosophy espoused in *Who's Your City?* is another pat on the back for the sub-section of the world's population who have the resources, ability and drive to move, its flipside puts a dystopian filter on the most democratic promises of globalisation.

FLORIDA describes up to 40 "mega-regions" that drive the world economy while containing only 18% of the world's population. "What we face is not a clash of civilisations but a deepening economic divide among the world's spikes and valleys," he writes apropos of Samuel Huntington's famous theory. "Most of the world's conflicts — even those seemingly unrelated to economics — stem from the underlying forces of a spiky world."

The result is anxiety on a mass scale — fear, resentment, and anger among those in the shadow of the mega-regional peaks. The theory encompasses, in Florida's eyes, unrest in the Middle East, problems in rural China, and the US political backlash by white, working-class people, which was given oxygen last week when US Democrat presidential hopeful Barack Obama said it wasn't surprising that small-town residents become bitter and "cling to guns or religion".

"I think he's absolutely right," says Florida, an avowed Obama supporter (in what might be bad news for Hillary Clinton, Obama is, he says, "overwhelmingly the candidate of the creative class"). "He was identifying something that is quite real and painful. White working-class people outside of (the mega-regions) are worried. They're lashing out in anger ... It's terrifying that so much of your life course depends on your ability to move."

Who's Your City? is US-centric in its focus — a global version is due towards the end of the year — but, reading between the lines of the "become a mega-region or die" theory, it would seem to imply the future for geographically isolated Australia is bleak. Florida, however, seems keen to use his theories to flatter.

Adelaide might have the stench of what he calls a second or third-tier city, doomed to increasing irrelevance ("I felt the hostility of people when I was there. People would glare

at me because of the way I dressed and the people I was with; there was a real sense of an economic divide") but Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane have the chance to solidify themselves into a kind of virtual mega-region to become "the preferred destinations for innovation, creativity and talent". Asked if our small population might be a hindrance, Florida remains determinedly upbeat. "Not at all — America started off small, too!"

The founder of Washington DC-based consultants, the Creative Class Group, is also in demand as a kind of corporate-creative-class whisperer. Florida and his team are currently advising Noosa City Council on how to attract a new-wave community of "barefoot executives" drawn by the laid-back lifestyle and proximity to Brisbane. Their mission has, however, been misconstrued by at least one local newspaper as a bid to lure more gays and lesbians to the region. It's a throwback to the stir caused by the "Bohemian Index" in *The Rise of the Creative Class*; the theory that bohemians and the gay community pioneer a suburb's popularity and can be used to predict rising property prices.

This time around, the real estate speculator might be interested to hear that Florida's crystal ball predicts the home-ownership dream central to American and Australian urban life may be on the wane. It's increasingly unaffordable; the crisis in the US housing market has tied people to properties that have plummeted in value. And the ultimate bugbear: it limits mobility. "Home ownership was fantastic in the industrial age. It stimulated the consumption of cars and TV sets and appliances, and where people had one job for life and, like my dad, worked in a factory and owned his home and bought this stuff and filled it up.

"But what I see is hopefully the rise of new kinds of rental housing. One of the reasons people don't like to rent is they can't make it theirs, but we're going to have to get to a point where people can take a lease and like they do for offices, they can outfit it the way they want it to be."

Even if shadowing the artistic demi-monde isn't your thing, *Who's Your City?* is also a practical guide to choosing a city. The website is full of testimonials from happy movers who have found fortune and favour in heeding his advice ("my career has exploded in my new environment", writes one acolyte).

Florida's 10-step evaluation includes working out what's important to you, making a short list, evaluating schools, houses, job opportunities, tolerance and recreation. Most importantly, he says: go there.

"People have to get over this idea to move somewhere after just visiting for a weekend. That's ridiculous. You wouldn't get married to someone after living with them for only a few weeks, you shouldn't choose a city in a short amount of time. It means people spend more time shopping for a car than they do shopping for a community."

RICHARD FLORIDA CV

BORN November 26, 1957, raised in Newark, New Jersey, US.

EDUCATION PhD, Columbia University, geography and urban planning, 1986.

PUBLICATIONS The Rise of the Creative Class, and How it's Transforming Work, Leisure and Everyday Life (2002); Cities and the Creative Class (2005); The Flight of the Creative Class: The New Global Competition for Talent (2005); Who's Your City? (2008).

CAREER Head, Prosperity Institute, Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto; Founder and head, development consultants the Creative Class Group, based in Washington DC.

PERSONAL Married to advice columnist, marketer and Creative Class Group chief executive Rana Kozouz.

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