

## Attracting the creative class

**IN 2002**, Richard Florida wrote an article in the Washington Monthly entitled The Rise of the Creative Class. In it, he argues that creative people, such as scientists, engineers, professors, poets, artists, designers, cultural figures, think-tank researchers and creative professionals like those involved in financial services, health care and business management are playing more and more important roles in economic development.



**LocalCounsel**  
by Goh Ban Lee

Two years later, he developed his thesis into a book of the same title that garnered rave reviews as an insightful portrait of development in the 21st century economy.

Florida then wrote a book entitled *Who's Your City?* in 2008. The funny-titled book explains how the creative economy is making where to live the most important decision in one's life. According to him, in today's creative economy, "economic growth comes from the clustering and concentrating of talented and productive people".

For those who hold strongly to the belief that cities are the engines of development, Florida's thesis on the clustering of creative people has provided a concrete path to development. What the urban managers and planners have to do is to attract creative people to their cities.

Florida does indicate the factors that attract the creative class. Apart from the usual livable city attributes such as a clean, green and safe environment and good public transport, cities that are in the radar screens of the creative class have what he terms as the "plug-and-play" communities where anyone can fit in quickly and where one does not get stuck in any one identity. In short, places of diversity in cultural and lifestyle choices are attractive to creative people.

There is no doubt that Malaysia needs creative people if the vision of a developed country, including breaking the "middle-income trap", is to be achieved.

Some initial steps have been taken. Lately, Malaysia has been playing host to urban scholars to stimulate discussions of making our cities attractive and "sticky". They include Charles Landry, the author of *The Creative City – A Toolkit for Urban Innovation* and World Bank economic adviser Dr Shahid Yusof. Plans are being made to invite Alfonso Vegara, the founder and president of Fundacion Metropoli, an organisation that has been helping cities to create attractive environments.

Inviting leading thinkers of urban development to talk about making the cities more attractive is the easy part. The difficult part is to ensure that the power-holders in the local authorities and

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state governments accept, let alone, implement what needs to be done.

The process is not easy. Malaysian towns and cities are still trying to clear the first hurdle of being attractive – a clean, safe and pleasant environment. For example, while the organisers and participants of cleaning the waterfront in Gurney Drive, Penang, on April 18 should be commended for picking up more than 6.4 tonnes of rubbish, including a refrigerator and a large tractor tyre, it is a sad reflection of the failure of urban management when such a large amount of rubbish is collected in a few hours by volunteers.

It is important to stress that George Town is not alone as far as lack of cleanliness is concerned.

The present system of local government and urban planning has too many obstacles to bring about attractive towns and cities. It is still difficult to get the councillors and state leaders to make the cities attractive to the creative class as they have to make some painful decisions, such as demolition of illegal hawker stalls or taking action against those who block walkways.

There is still uncertainty in the enforcement of "moral codes" to attract the creative people, especially those who cherish the freedom to practise alternative lifestyle choices. The recent report of a youth falling to his death trying to avoid a moral enforcement squad sends a frightening message.

Despite the mantra of good governance by national and state leaders, there has been little serious attempt to change the administrative status quo in the local authorities. The ratepayers, including those who are interested in the functioning of their local authorities, are generally in the dark on how their tax ringgit is spent.

There is a big difference between declaring to adopt the principles of good urban governance and practising transparent and accountable administration. Worse, one seldom hears of presidents or mayors of local authorities even promising to be accountable and transparent to their ratepayers.

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