



Abu Dhabi could be a laboratory for hundreds of cities

[Nick Leech](#)

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Over the course of the next several decades we are going to put more people in cities than currently live in all the cities of the world. We are currently putting ten thousand people an hour into urban areas and we are going to put millions more people into cities over the next 20 to 30 years. Think about that."

It is a daunting question, delivered with a mixture of urgency, awe and alarm by the distinguished academic and urban theorist Richard Florida, a global research professor at New York University and the director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto's Rotman school of management. He asks the question of almost everyone he meets.

Prof Florida is a self-confessed man on a mission and the challenge he has set himself, to develop a new science of what he describes as "creative place-making", comes with the very highest stakes. "I think of all the grand challenges that face this world, from climate change to global agriculture, of all the great problems we face, I would argue that there is no grander challenge in world history, than how we tackle this next wave of urbanisation and how we build great cities."

Luckily, Prof Florida has no shortage of listeners, thanks in no small part to his activities as a senior editor at The Atlantic magazine and to a series of books such as *Who's Your City?*, *The Great Reset*, and *The Rise of the Creative Class* which have bridged the gap between academic research and international bestseller.

The technology bible Fast Company describes Florida as an "intellectual rock star", Time magazine nominated his Twitter feed as one of the 140 most influential in the world and The Economist described him as "as close to a household name as it is possible for an urban theorist to be in America".

Like him or loathe him - and Prof Florida has been accused of everything from neo-liberalism and faulty statistical analysis to being a celebrator of "hipster embourgeoisement" - there is no denying the power of his ideas. Since the publication of *The Rise of the Creative Class* in 2002, his ideas have influenced state and city governments, city mayors, multinational corporations, property developers, chief executives and urban planners.

Prof Florida is sitting in his office at NYUAD's Sama Tower a week after he delivered his public lecture, *The Geography of Progress: Cities in a World of Seven Billion*, to a packed auditorium at Abu Dhabi's Intercontinental Hotel.

That night he spoke, suited, for almost an hour without notes in a manner more akin to a presidential candidate than an urban theorist, and his lecture was peppered with anecdotes, jokes and calls to action.

Up close, Prof Florida is less the politician and more the rock star, he wears jeans and his cufflinks are tiny skulls, his beguiling eloquence and measured delivery are just the same. He has been at the university for most of January, teaching a new course in global cities and using the time to become more familiar with the city, its residents and its decision-makers.

This is not his first visit to the capital, he was invited to speak at a conference on global cities in 2009, but his latest visit has also allowed him to become better acquainted with the particular brand of urbanism that is developing here.

Dr Florida's primary guides have been his students, who teach him more than anybody else does, he says, and his family.

Thanks to his Jordanian wife, Rana, Florida also has a network of extended family in Abu Dhabi, many of whom have lived in the UAE for decades. "I feel that I've gotten to know the city pretty well. My first and my basic impression was that the city far exceeded my expectations. I don't know what I expected, but I didn't expect this."

When he talks about the city, Florida cites its physical and strategic infrastructure - the airport, ports, roads, the Corniche and Vision Abu Dhabi 2030 - as important milestones that have allowed the city to develop thus far, but it is Abu Dhabi's potential that excites him most.

"Abu Dhabi could be a laboratory for the other hundreds of cities ... that have to be built over the coming decades to accommodate the world's population. Abu Dhabi could be a laboratory for distilling those practices and developing those techniques, the curricula, and the tools that other cities around the world could use.

"I think it's the natural place to bring people together - planners and urbanists - to think about that experiment not only here but globally."

For Prof Florida, Abu Dhabi's future economic success will be determined not by the efforts that it has made thus far, although he admits these have provided an essential foundation, but by its success in attracting and retaining members of an increasingly global and internationally mobile group of knowledge-based workers he has dubbed the "Creative Class".

The notion of the Creative Class lies at the very core of Prof Florida's theories of economic and urban development. It is a theory that identifies attractive, active and rapidly changing cities - not corporations - as the engines of economic growth and innovation and people as their principal source of wealth. Most importantly for Prof Florida, is the Creative Class's growing power and size. He cites the example of the United States where there are now 40 million members of the Creative Class, representing more than a third of the workforce, half of all wages paid and three quarters of all discretionary purchasing power, while in global cities they represent more than 40 per cent of the total workforce.

Crucially he says, this group - made of scientists, technologists, innovators and entrepreneurs, professionals in management, business, health care and the law as well as "bohemians" in the arts, music, design, entertainment and the media - are able to choose where they live. They can do this because 75 per cent of this group are either single, in young couples, childless, or are "empty nesters" with grown-up children.

In such a marketplace the offer of safety, employment, a good business climate, good schools and low rates of taxation are no longer enough to ensure a city's competitiveness and success. It must also have what the academic describes as the right "people climate", something that he equates with the notions of "quality of place" and "creative place-making" rather than the older notion of "quality of life".

It is a desire that is also confirmed by Prof Florida's students at NYUAD, and both insist that it is only by addressing these issues that Abu Dhabi will succeed in the next phase of its development as he argues.

"If Abu Dhabi has done many things right or wrong, the one thing it hasn't thought through is how to attract young people ... Abu Dhabi is thinking of a middle-aged man ... and what would be attractive to him: good schools, good health care, golf courses, nice highways, somewhere to park your big car... but a lot of the people it will need to attract and build attachment to will want something different from the middle-aged family man. What I'm hearing from my students is 'that's not going to attract us'."

On the ground, this means a more pedestrian and bike-friendly city, better pavements, markets, shops and parks - all the things that make life richer and cities more liveable. Not only are these indicators of the kind of urban vitality that has proved vital in attracting and retaining members of the Creative Class, they are part of a healthier and more sustainable urban fabric as a whole. As Prof Florida has argued in his research, "greener" cities all have higher rates of education and economic growth.

Quality of place also means greater social and civic opportunity and the logic of economic development is inextricably linked with the logic of social change. In Abu Dhabi, this dynamic was unleashed when the emirate first embarked on modernisation and now there is no turning back, he says. The key is to make sure that the change is managed in a way that is culturally sensitive and responsible as possible.

"If Abu Dhabi wants to achieve its goals of diversification and a knowledge economy ... it's got to become more open-minded, it's got to become more accepting, and it's got to become more diverse ... If cities want to capitalise on this flux, on this talent flow, they have to be inclusive. They can't just say you're here, have fun."

Prof Florida denies that he is trying to tell anybody how to do their job. His first responsibility, he insists, is to his students and to a generation faced with the overwhelming task of dealing with the next great wave of urbanisation that has already begun.

After an hour in Florida's company, it's hard not to be convinced by his rhetoric and his invitation, which is almost too good to resist. It's not often that we are asked to join an elite global club and a global solution of which Florida, incidentally, is the leader. Florida's role, as he sees it, is to "inspire a context" that will help to frame how decision-makers around the world, and in Abu Dhabi, see the future and to provide the research, data, and ideas that will provide nothing less than a new template for the city of the 21st century.

Florida claims that his aim is not criticism but action, inspired as he is by "one of the grandest challenges of our time". Whether he will succeed where so many before have failed is open to question, but one thing is beyond doubt, if anybody has the necessary charm and self-belief to rise to the challenge, it is surely Richard Florida: academic, polemicist, rock star.

