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The personality of places

Barry Quirk

The success of a city depends as much on its ‘personality’ as other contributing factors, a new book has claimed. Barry Quirk suggests we should be looking at the personality of places when place-shaping.

Places have personalities. Some attract neurotics, while others appeal to extroverts.

Where we live contributes more to our overall happiness than how much we earn.

And if you want to move to an area where house prices will rise more than others – move to localities which have higher ratios of gay and lesbian residents. Well, that’s some of the findings reported in Richard Florida’s new book, [Who’s Your City](#).



Just capital: London, claims Richard Florida, is a superstar city, which over hundreds of years has attracted ambitious, energetic and open-minded people
Photo: Mike King

Six years ago, Florida wrote about the rise of the ‘creative class’ and its impact on the economy of nations and cities. Now, he has turned his sights on place and locality.

And while his work is focused squarely on US cities, it is an excellent antidote to much of the stale thinking in the UK.

Put simply, our prevailing approach is to measure the differences between places so we can more readily adopt standard policies and practices which we hope will lead to greater convergence across the geography of the UK.

Florida’s approach, blending the wisdoms of economic geography with the new science of behavioural psychology, is at odds with this thinking.

The idea of ‘agglomeration economies’ was first suggested in 1890 by the economist, Alfred Marshall. Basically, while some firms take advantage of economies of scale by integrating their activities and growing larger, others benefit by the economies which stem from them locating close to one another.

This is the source of the ‘clustering force’ which can be seen in financial quarters, creative quarters and product or service markets – such as for jewellery in London’s Hatton Garden, or legal advice in nearby Lincoln’s Inn Fields.

Florida argues that clustering is an exceptionally-powerful economic force, and that it is also a sorting and filtering social force. And he shows how it is occurring in very many key occupational groups, creating a new geography of work – in occupations as diverse as hedge financing, gaming software production, motor car design, theatrical and artistic work, and so on.

His work suggests these clustering forces in the private economy are exceptionally strong, and have profound effects for localities. His argument is not that ‘birds of a feather flock together’, but that substantial productivity gains arise from clustering – and that these gains benefit those involved, and the economy, more generally.

The strength and force of his argument has significant implications for regional and city-wide spatial planning. Should all economic clustering be encouraged, supported and reinforced, or should it, in some cases, be actively discouraged?

From an argument about the economic effects of clustering, Mr Florida then suggests cities have personalities of their own – derived from the differential personality traits of their residents and developed over generations.

By linking the results of personality profiles of more than 350,000 Americans with their zip codes, Florida and his associates mapped, among other things, the prevalence of extroversion, neuroticism and tolerance in different US cities.

And the results are fascinating. They show, for example, that neurotics are concentrated on the Eastern coast, and that extroverts are more concentrated along a diagonal axis from Chicago through to St Louis.

But why should this be? Again, Florida suggests it is the long-run effects of clustering – literally, people sorting themselves with like people or in like industry sectors. The source of his work is certainly worth exploring in more depth in the UK.

Overall, he concludes that place is more important than ever before. Where you chose to live is fundamental to the quality of your life. And he uses the results of a 27,000-person survey of ‘place and happiness’ to identify which US cities are preferred by which types of households.

This points to the importance of place relative to personal life, work, and finances – place comes third – and to the varied attachment to place by people at different stages in their family cycle. Unsurprisingly, mobile young professionals have different place and amenity preferences from families with children or the growing cohorts of ‘empty nesting’ baby boomers.

At one level, this is simply common sense, but it does suggest that cities need to have a variegated approach to designing their communities. In this respect, Mr Florida’s findings about the positive impact of concentrations of gay and lesbian residents on house prices is perhaps his most controversial. It is a stereotypical description, even if it is a positive stereotype.

By analysing a range of income, wealth and social factors with housing values across 300 US metropolitan regions, Florida found two highly-correlated factors. The first was obvious – income. The wealthier the residents, the pricier the housing. But, importantly, the correlation was to wealth and not income.

The second factor with a high correlation to high house values was their score against a ‘Bohemian and gay’ index. His theory is that Bohemian, artistic and gay populations capitalise on two distinct sub-factors of high-value housing.

First, is the aesthetic and amenity premium – these populations are both attracted to amenity and they produce amenity. And second, is their tolerance and open-mindedness. Florida argues that

artistic and gay populations tend to cluster in communities which value open-mindedness and self-expression. These highly-valued social factors are those which drive improved economic value in localities and so, increase house prices.

These may seem somewhat unconnected points, but put together they have a strong resonance in London. Mr Florida calls London a 'superstar' city which, over hundreds of years, has attracted ambitious, energetic and open-minded people.

The personality of the people it attracts and continues to attract is part of its DNA, and makes it successful. He argues that, 'regional economic growth requires two dimensions – depth and breadth. Depth comes from specialisation and developing deep experience in certain key fields. Breadth comes from diversity and the open-mindedness required to accept, generate and convert new ideas'.

London's depth is its financial and business services sector. Its breadth arises from the combined and dynamic personality of its people.

Perhaps the new economic assessments we are busy developing should focus as much on the enduring personality of our places as on the opportunities and threats to the local economies themselves.

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