

To live and die in Perth

Susan Maushart | *April 11, 2009*

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Choosing a city, argues author Richard Florida, is much like choosing a mate.

This could explain a lot about why some of us are still single and stuck in Perth.

In his new book *Who's Your City?*, Florida makes the case that deciding where to live is possibly the most crucial life decision a person can make, right up there with what to do for a living, who not to marry, and whether to have kids or just keep renting. Older generations accepted their geographic place as a given – a condition of birth, like original sin or a severe cowlick.

Not so today, when we are expected to self-manage everything from our super to our sexuality assuming we are lucky enough to have any left in these troubled times).

It's a loosey-goosey world out there, and everything is up for grabs – cities very much included. And more of us are rising to the challenge every day, says Florida (an urban geographer who lives in Toronto but hangs out for the hols in Miami Beach, in an unostentatious yet eponymous kind of way).

Three-quarters of the residents of global cities say they chose to live there – including 70 per cent of New Yorkers, 80 per cent of Sydneysiders, 90 per cent of Shanghaisters, and a surprising number of the cane toads crossing the WA border in search of greater personal freedom.

Worldwide, one in every 35 people lives outside their country of birth. Here in Perth, more than a third of the population was born overseas, suggesting either deliberate choice or, more plausibly perhaps, a shocking sense of direction.

Florida further argues that cities, like individuals, have specific metabolic rates.

Hong Kong is like a hummingbird on crack-cocaine. Brussels struggles with hypothyroidism.

Suburban Perth grunts in its sleep like a grizzly bear, living off its own stored fat and a heartbeat that, like hurricanes in Hampshire, hardly happens.

Cities also have personalities, Florida proposes, and can be categorised as either “open to experience” (Melbourne, maybe), conscientious (Adelaide, assuredly), extroverted (Sydney – OMG!!), agreeable (Hobart or Brisbane, if you like) or neurotic (Perth, now piss off). Truly – Perth was ranked among the most neurotic cities in the entire world.

Turns out it's all about Perth's extreme isolation, and the unique mental health trade deficit that goes with that.

Basically, we export the sort of people who seek engagement with the wider world (the young and the functional) – while attracting the sort of people who seek divorce from the wider world. And in most cases, the differences really are irreconcilable.