

This City

YEAR IN REVIEW



Creative class president: Richard Florida is an urban guru with a knack for self-promotion

MAN OF THE YEAR

Florida Factor

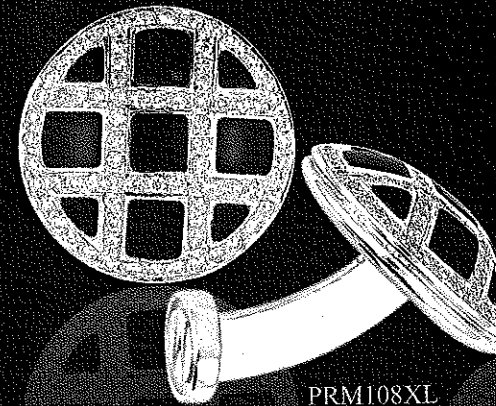
He schmoozes, he scores. Richard Florida's first year in Toronto was a regular love riot.

BY MIKE MINER

IF RICHARD FLORIDA WERE AN INFLUENTIAL '60S POP BAND, he would be The Beatles. Not because he enjoys strumming his acoustic Fender after a jam-packed day's work (although he does), and not because of his boyish good looks (he's got those, too). Florida would be The Beatles because from the second he arrived in his adoptive home to head up the University of Toronto's new Martin Prosperity Institute, Toronto has played the role of a miniskirt-wearing, panty-throwing fanatic, swooning at his every utterance. Not since Prince took up residence on the Bridle Path has a red carpet been so royally rolled out. And Florida's not even a rock star. He's an academic, an egghead, albeit an egghead with a fairly glamorous dance card: intimate get-togethers at Mayor Miller's home; cozy dinners with Frank Gehry; front-row seats at fashion week; shoulder-rubbing at TIFF; box seats at the ACC. The swami of urban living even popped up among the sexy and span-dexed crowd at the MuchMusic Video Awards—"Professor Florida, can you tell us your favourite Rihanna song?"—and was name-dropped by Dalton McGuinty in the middle of the provincial budget (the Premier hoped the F-word might help bolster our flagging economy). In short, if you didn't see Richard Florida in 2008, you weren't looking, because man, did we make a fuss.

In many ways, Toronto's brain crush on Florida is understandable. Here we have a renowned city expert who made his name publishing books on the importance of thriving, creative metropolises. His latest, *Who's Your City?*, which came out last March, went so

PHOTOGRAPH BY VANESSA HEINS



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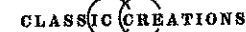
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far as to claim that even though we're living in an era of globalization, the standard wisdom still applies: location, location, location. According to Florida, the city a person opts to live in is as important as the career they choose or even the person they marry. All that, and he chooses to live here. It's hard not to feel a little chuffed.

I spoke with Florida two days after Barack Obama's election and wondered whether the massive liberal shift in the States, coupled with Canada's recent reelection of the Harper Conservatives, had him longing for home. Not so. Even today, after the Hogtown honeymoon phase should have ended, Florida says he probably "underestimated the fit" between himself and Toronto. But did Toronto, in our desperate desire to feel important, do the opposite?

Florida got his PhD in philosophy in urban planning at Columbia University, and before the move north he was a professor of public policy at George Mason University in Washington. But, impressive as his accolades are (his CV is 12 pages long), they're not what get Florida-philes fighting for a seat at his table. His celebrity status stems instead from his self-appointed position as Pied Piper of the "creative class," a Florida-trademarked term describing approximately 40 per cent of the North American population—everyone from

Richard Florida thinks he may have underestimated the fit between himself and his adoptive hometown. But did Toronto—in our desperate desire to feel important—do the opposite?

doctors to DJs. It's this group, he says, that drives successful urban economies, and a city's world-class potential hinges on its ability to attract it. His own success, however, depends less on the originality of his ideas (what urban centre wouldn't welcome an influx of architects and scientists and clever fringy art folk?) than on his ability to package them creatively.

Florida takes a net-free approach to public speaking. More Tony Robbins than Jane Jacobs, he regularly abandons the podium and has a talent for inspiring his audiences. His books—first *The Rise of the Creative Class*, then *The Flight of the Creative Class*—provide further proof of his knack for making stodgy subjects sparkle, hence their national and international best-sellerdom. And if he made us feel a little smarter

because we were suddenly devouring books about urban theory, well, isn't that what true love is all about?

In the year following the initial ticker-tape extravaganza, Florida settled into a comfortable if hectic existence. He lives with his wife and manager, Rana (he's the thinker, she's the doer), at a suitably stately Rosedale address, but made time early on to appreciate the city's less tony enclaves. Kensington Market, Little Italy and even Yonge-Dundas Square were all subjects of Florida gush-fests in the *Globe*. So while we were dousing ourselves in his Kool-Aid, he was guzzling ours too (Yonge-Dundas Square, "really beautiful"? Whatever you say, Dick).

Of course, not everyone is lining up to get a sip. Critics attack the vagueness and intangibility of Florida's city spouting, calling his research anecdotal at best, "snake oil" at worst. The statistics don't always stack up in his favour, either (the most successful skilled city by population growth in the '90s was Plano, Texas—more of a burb than a boho utopia). Locally, the backlash has had a more sarcastic tinge, perhaps best demonstrated by fellow *Globe* columnist R. M. Vaughan, who has taken to handing out buttons that read "Please stop talking about Richard Florida." Snarky, yes, but the slogan is less a dig at Florida than at the Torontonians who awkwardly

shoehorn his name and his notions into conversations on everything from opera to hors d'oeuvre.

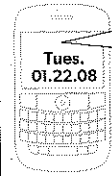
Toronto's standing on the Floridian scale of fabulous cities is in some ways self-evident (he lives here, doesn't he?), but this spring we can expect another meeting of the mutual-adoration society with the release of an updated, Canada-specific version of *Who's Your City?* In it, Toronto will be pitted against other Canadian cities, as well as international winners and losers. And not to toot our own horn, but chances are we'll come out looking pretty swell. While other metropolises were vying to reel in members of the creative class, we went and caught ourselves the Moby Dick of the whole movement. Surely bonus points are in order.

MAN OF THE HOUR

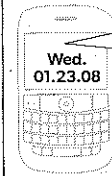
If it seemed like Richard Florida was everywhere in 2008, that's because he was. Here's how he spent one week in January 2008



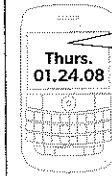
8 a.m. Morning research reading
8 a.m. Martin Prosperity Institute meeting with Rotman team
11:30 a.m. Research team meeting
2 p.m. Teach class
4 p.m. Research for *Who's Your City?*
8 p.m. Blog
6:30 p.m. Ravine walk with Rana
7:30 p.m. Dinner at Louise Denny's (Random House Canada) and Ric Young's home



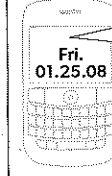
10:30 a.m. Admin meeting with Kevin Stolarick, MPI research director
11 a.m. CBC Radio with Andy Barrie
12:30 p.m. Lunch and tour of new MPI space with Larry Bourne
1:30 p.m. Meet with Paul Starobin of *The Atlantic*
2 p.m. In-person interview with Joe Castaldo for *Canadian Business*
2:30 p.m. Meet with Aileen Carroll, Minister of Culture
3:30 p.m. Meet with *Varsity* editor-in-chief Chandler Levack
5 p.m. Phone interview with *Australia's Boss* magazine
6 p.m. Meet with MPI research team on creative class data project, Ontario project and music project
9 p.m. Terroni pizza and icewine with Rana



11 a.m. Meet with David Pecaut and others on the Toronto City Summit
1:30 p.m. Blog
2:30 p.m. Meet with Daniel Baird of *The Walrus*
4:30 p.m. Meet with Yugui Guo, a director at Shanghai University of Finance and Economics
6 p.m. Travel to Valencia, Spain, for speaking engagement (write foreword to Jack Diamond's architecture book on Toronto, write *Globe* column, review typeset pages of *Who's Your City?* on plane)



10:30 a.m. Tour Valencia's port, four interviews
11:30 a.m. Tour Santiago Calatrava's City of Arts and Sciences centre
1 p.m. Lunch with Spanish author Juan Carlos Cubeiro
2 p.m. Speak at First International Conference of New Urban Culture
5:30 p.m. Book signing
4 p.m. Spanish press interviews
9 p.m. Eat paella at local restaurant



6 p.m. Fly back to Toronto (blog, edit column and finish MPI research paper on plane)
7 p.m. Drink icewine, order Pizza Nova pizza
9 p.m. Play guitar

* Florida's daily blog intake:

Airroots, All About Cities, All Songs Considered, Alphaville, The American Scene, Andrew Leonard, Andrew Sullivan, Angry Bear, The Belkows, Borges Blog, Calculated Risk, CEOs for Cities, CoolTown Studios, Creaked Timber, Curious Capitalist, Dan Rodrik, Dynamis, EconLog, Economist's View, Edge Perspective, Felix Salmon, Freakonomics, Grant McCracken, Greg Mandel, Long Toes, Marginal Revolution, Michael Mandel, Mwriter Ais, Hacked Capitalist, How Economist, Next American City, Notes From the Lounges, Planetizen, Steven Johnson, Streetology, Tom Peters, Undercover Economist, Urban Planning Research, Where.

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