



## ***Who's Your City?* by Richard Florida**

Reviewed by Marty Vanags, CEO, Economic Development Council of the Bloomington-Normal Area

In the year 1492, Christopher Columbus set sail for the new world. He convinced the Queen of Portugal to finance his trip so he could discover a new passage to the riches of the Far East. As we all know now, he was way ahead of his time in many ways. Of course, we were all taught that he was "thinking out of the box" when he said that the world is round and not flat like many believed at the time. And, while he did not actually find his great passage to the east, he did prove to some degree that there was a world yet to be explored.

### **Flat or spiky?**

Fast forward about 500 years, when author Thomas Freidman reversed the idea of a round world with his book, *The World is Flat*. In his book, Freidman spends 608 pages describing how through technology and interconnection the world as we Americans once knew it has changed. Because much of what is being produced in the information age can be transported through communication networks that are becoming cheaper and cheaper, many parts of the world we once thought to be "underdeveloped" are beginning to provide a cheap source of labor as economic controls and open markets become ubiquitous. Whether we celebrate this phenomena as an obvious outcome of the Cold War (open markets and economic freedom for all, even those once considered Third World), or we lament the loss of jobs here at home, Freidman tells us we need to recognize and adjust to this new world and become accustomed to the United States' new position in a global economy. People can live anywhere, Freidman says, and their quality of life will increase. People can live anywhere, but will they?

Along comes Richard Florida, author of the 2002 bestseller *The Rise of the Creative Class*, which received *The Washington Monthly's* Political Book Award for that year and was later named by Harvard Business Review as one of the top breakthrough ideas of

2004. The *New York Times* called it "an important book for those who feel passionately about the future of the urban center." Cities and regions across the United States and the world have embarked on new creativity strategies based on Florida's ideas. A subsequent book called *The Flight of the Creative Class*, which examines the global competition for creative talent, was published in March 2005. Florida follows these two books with one more book, titled *Who's your City? – How the Creative Economy is Making Where to Live the Most Important Decision of Your Life*. In Florida's newest book he challenges Freidman's idea of the flat world.

Florida's main premise in *Who's Your City?* is that the world is, in fact, "spiky," and people make very deliberate decisions about where they live based upon a number of factors. This spikiness is a result of some very descriptive and interesting maps created by a co-researcher. These maps show what look like very steep rocky mountains to depict the increase of population in the largest metropolitan areas throughout the world. In *Who's Your City?*, Florida supports his creativity index first rolled out in *The Rise of the Creative Class* study wherein he argues the fastest-growing and most economically stable communities are those which harbor and welcome the most creative people in our world. This "clustering force," as he calls it, is a very strong trend creating "mega-cities." Through this clustering, these mega-cities are the engines of economic growth.

Florida is not some pop-demographer whose main forte is selling books; rather, Florida is the professor of business and creativity at the Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto. At Rotman, he is the academic-director of the Lloyd & Delphine Martin Prosperity Institute. He has also spent time at Carnegie Mellon University, is a visiting professor at Harvard and MIT and a visiting fellow of the Brookings Institution. Florida earned his bachelor's degree from Rutgers College and his Ph.D. from Columbia University. Known as an economic demographer, Florida has scholastic credentials and mounds of data, which he is not shy about revealing and discussing in this particularly telling and informative book.

### **Applying the ideas**

Economic developers love to hear what Florida has to say, but few have managed to take his ideas and principles and use them to their advantage. Florida's current book informs us about the status of the world's current population trends and how they ultimately impact our economic future. Can a community like Bloomington-Normal exist and, more importantly, prosper in Florida's spiky world? Or should we give up and allow the mega-cities like Chi-Pitts, the region that stretches from Pittsburgh to Chicago to Milwaukee to Minneapolis, dominate our economy? According to Florida, we don't have a choice. This region, by the way, is the closest Bloomington-Normal gets to a mega-city, but apparently we don't have enough population between here and Joliet to fill in the gap. Rest assured there must be some spin-off from the third largest mega-region, according to Florida, that pumps out \$1.6 trillion in economic product.

In 2004, Richard Karlgaard, publisher of Forbes magazine, published a book called *Life 2.0: How People Across America Are Transforming Their Lives by Finding the Where of Their Happiness*. He would say that Bloomington- Normal does indeed have a chance. Inherently less scientific and rigorous than Florida's research, Karlgaard divides the United States into categories with fun and interesting names such as "Happy Hootervilles" which are towns and communities under 25,000 with reasonable house prices for white collar professionals fleeing pricey urban coasts. Places like Douglas, Georgia or East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania fall into this category. Bloomington-Normal falls into the category of "Porch-Swing Communities," which are described by Karlgaard as places for people seeking a "Norman Rockwell hometown feeling – vintage American suffused with parades, country fairs and summer evenings playing kick-the-can."

Karlgaard indicates, through a series of anecdotal stories from when he learned to fly a plane at age 45 and flew around the country to see how America had reacted to the promise of technology, that not everybody is fleeing to the large regions despite what Florida's research tells us. Mixed messages, but hope for those not located in or near a mega-region.

In the final part of this book, Florida delves into "Where We Live Now" by looking at three categories: The Young and the Restless, Married with Children and When the Kids are Gone. In each category he tells of the places these age groups are living and how they select their places of residence. Most interesting is his analysis of the Young and the Restless which, as one might have guessed, are those in the age range of 18 to 30. Florida says that more than ever he and his researchers have concluded this age group has a propensity to decide where they want to live, then seek out a job once there. One of the primary decision points in this location decision rests with the influence of friends and mating. The Young and the Restless want to go where their friends are and where they are most likely to find someone with whom to "hook up," or even the more antiquated idea of getting married. In a post-nuclear family world, being with friends seems to be a major decision point for young people.

### **Know your place**

Florida's new book, once again, is filled with so much information that a once-over read is probably not enough. As an economic developer I seek his information to see how it might inform our attraction strategies and our economic development policies as a community. What are the things the Young and the Restless are seeking (other than a "mate") that would attract them to Bloomington-Normal? What about the more creative members of our society? What do we have to offer that would attract and retain them here? Or are we a "Porch-Swing" community as proposed by Karlgaard, which relegates us to permanent kick-the-can status? I would like to think that Florida's well-researched book informs economic development practitioners, city council members, business executives, entrepreneurs and many others who care about the future of their local community environment and can help them develop sound strategies. In grade school we were taught how Columbus discovered a new world, and we were also told if we work

hard enough we could be anything we wanted to be. This still holds true for our community, as Richard Florida has shown, whether he knows it or not.

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