



Why 'Where' Is More Important than 'Who' or 'What'

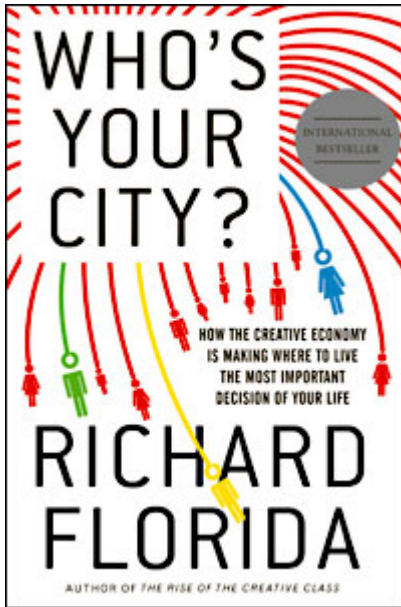


✦ [Author Richard Florida](#)

[Talk of the Nation](#), June 19, 2008 · For the first time ever, says author and Toronto University's Business and Creativity Professor Richard Florida, many of us have the freedom and economic means to choose our place — and the opportunity to find the place that fits us best is even more important than choosing a career or even a spouse.

Excerpt: 'Who's Your City?'

by Richard Florida



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Richard Florida

The Biggest Decision of All

If someone asked you to list life's biggest decisions, what would you say? If you're like most people, you'd probably start with two things.

The first, I call the "what factor." Most of us will say that one of the key decisions in life is figuring out what you want to do for your career. Even if money can't buy happiness, many people believe that doing work you love is likely to give you a prosperous and fulfilling life. My father drilled that notion into me. "Richard," he would say, "you don't have to end up in a factory like me, working hard and punching a clock for modest pay. You need to be a lawyer or doctor, so you can do something important and make good money."

Many would add that an essential prerequisite to financial and career success is getting a good education and attending the right schools. Graduate from Harvard, MIT, Stanford, or Princeton, so goes the theory, and the rest will take care of itself. A good education is the means to a great job, a solid financial future, and a happy life. My parents, like so many others, were education fanatics. Even though they struggled to make ends meet, they put my brother Robert and me in Catholic school — which required not only tuition but also regular contributions to the local parish — and impressed upon us day and night

the importance of studying hard, getting good grades, and going to college. They inspected our report cards and gave us rewards for good marks. Like so many other hardworking and devoted parents of modest means, they saw education as the key to upward mobility.

Others, meanwhile, will argue that while jobs, money, and schooling are surely important, the most critical decision in life is picking the right life partner — someone who will support you in all your endeavors and love you unconditionally along the way. Those who study human psychology agree: Loving relationships, their studies find, are key to a happy life. My mother knew this intuitively. She turned down many college-educated suitors to marry my dad, a factory worker and World War II veteran with an eighth-grade education. "Richard," she would say, "it was the best decision of my life by far. Sure, some of those other guys made more money. But love is what is really important. I was madly in love with your father every day of my entire life."

Without question, both of those decisions — the what and the who — mean a great deal to our lives. But there is another decision that has an equal, if not greater, effect on our economic future, happiness, and overall life outcome. The question of where.

Maybe this seems so obvious that people overlook it. Finding the right place is as important as — if not more important than — finding the right job or partner because it not only influences those choices but also determines how easy or hard it will be to correct mistakes made along the way. Still, few of us actually look at a place that way. Perhaps it's because so few of us have the understanding or mental framework necessary to make informed choices about our location.

The place we choose to live affects every aspect of our being. It can determine the income we earn, the people we meet, the friends we make, the partners we choose, and the options available to our children and families. People are not equally happy everywhere, and some places do a better job of providing a high quality of life than others. Some places offer us more vibrant labor markets, better career prospects, higher real estate appreciation, and stronger investment and earnings opportunities. Some places offer more promising mating markets. Others are better environments for raising children.

Place also affects how happy we are in other, less palpable ways. It can be an island of stability in a sea of uncertainty and risk. Jobs end. Relationships break up. Choosing the right place can be a hedge against life's downsides. I hate to dwell on the negative, but you need to think about this. It's always terrible to lose a job, even worse to suffer a breakup with a significant other. As bad as those are, however, they are substantially worse if you also happen to live somewhere with few options in the job market or the mating market. It's exponentially easier to get back on your feet when your location has a vibrant economy with lots of jobs to choose from, or a lot of eligible single people in your age range to date.

The point is, where we live is a central life factor that affects all the others — work, education, and love — that follow. It can make or break existing work arrangements and personal relationships. It can open new doors. And regardless of what kind of life we envision for ourselves—whether we aspire to make millions, have a family, or live the way of a bachelor — choosing where to live is a decision we all must make at least once. A good number of us will make it multiple times. The average American moves once every seven years. More than 40 million people relocate each year; 15 million make significant moves of more than 50 or 100 miles.

The stakes are high, and yet, when faced with the decision of where to call home, most of us are not prepared to make the right choice. If you ask most people how they got to the place they live now, they'll say they just ended up there. They stayed close to family or friends, they got a job there, or more commonly, they followed an old flame. Some don't even see that there's a choice to be made at all.

Still, the miracle of our modern age is that we do have a choice. For the first time ever, a huge number of us have the freedom and economic means to choose our place. That means we have an incredible opportunity to find the place that fits us best. But this remarkable freedom forces us to decide among a large number of options. Today there are many types of communities out there, all with something different to offer.

The key is to find a place that fits you — one that makes you happy and enables you to achieve your life goals. For some people, career and wealth are big components of their happiness, but that is far from everybody. Many of us know people who left good jobs and prosperous careers in law or engineering to do something they truly love. Others move back to their hometown after college to help run the family business or to be closer to family and friends. These people usually know very well what they are giving up, and they make their choices knowingly. They prefer family and community to wealth. And many people are very happy where they are. These people may well know the real value of community better than others. What they value about place is the opportunity to live their lives in the towns and among the people already familiar to them.

The thing to remember is that when it comes to place, like most other important things in life, we can't have it all. There are real tradeoffs to be made. Many people who move for their careers will give up the joy of being near family and lifelong friends. Those of us who choose to stay close to family and friends may give up economic opportunity.

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