



FEATURED WRITER OF THE MONTH

Interview with: **RICHARD FLORIDA**



Interview by: **Warwick Sabin**

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Richard Florida is one of the world's leading public intellectuals, and *Esquire* magazine recently named him one of the "Best and Brightest" in America. He is author of the national and international best-selling book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, which received the Washington Monthly's Political Book Award and was cited as a major breakthrough idea by the Harvard Business Review. Florida also is a regular columnist with the *Globe and Mail* newspaper in Canada and has written articles for the *Atlantic*, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Harvard Business Review*, the *Boston Globe* and the *Financial Times*. He is Director of the Martin Prosperity Institute and

Professor of Business and Creativity at the Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto.

His new book, *Who's Your City?*, is a national and international best-seller and was an Amazon Book of the Month.

Now that Florida has stimulated further debate about the correlation between location and happiness, *OA* publisher Warwick Sabin asked him to apply his theories to the American South, where a sense of place has always mattered most.

—THE EDITORS

WARWICK SABIN: Your most recent book, *Who's Your City?*, is based upon the assertion that where you live may be the most important factor in determining a person's overall happiness. As a magazine that focuses on Southern culture, *The Oxford American* is also very interested in the qualitative merits of location, although it seems that an appreciation of life in the American South requires a particular sensibility.

That may explain why a significant number of people choose to live in the South, even if they don't fit the profile you assign to the region. Or to put it another way, even if your formula (or calculation of values and attributes) may suggest that someone would be better off living in New York or San Francisco, that person may still end up being happier in the South, because of its unique and unquantifiable culture and aesthetics.

Is this just denial on our part? Or does the South have a unique profile and character that resists neat categorization?

RICHARD FLORIDA: In the global battle for creative talent, we are going to see a strong emphasis, greater than ever before, on the importance of quality of place. All cities and communities are unique. Different types of people are attracted to cities and communities for an array of reasons. For some it may be economic opportunity, while for others the choice is because the area provides access to outdoors, urban amenities—restaurants, nightlife, arts and culture—or good schools. Many may select their communities because of the access and proximity to friends and family or a combination of the aforementioned. Whatever the reason, authenticity plays an overarching role; creative workers—the innovative engine to our future economic prosperity—are selecting communities that have all features of a complete authentic community.

WS: You are very partial to cities, of course. (The title of your book effectively dismisses the alternative.) However, the South has less than a handful of major metropolitan areas (Atlanta, New Orleans), and our "cities" (Louisville, Birmingham) are far smaller than even less notable cities in other regions of the country.

Is that a good thing or a bad thing? Can the advantages of cities be translated simply on a proportional scale (every Southern city has at least some of the amenities of the largest

metropolitan areas), or does the South need to develop larger metropolitan areas to make itself more dynamic and attractive?

RF: First, it's important to understand quality of place is not a one-size-fits-all model. Some may prefer a small community with a vibrant arts scene, while others may want a large metro that has access to the outdoors. In addition, workers at different stages in their lives may also want different types of communities and amenities. This is why my team and I comprised rankings for different size communities for each life style. I hope my readers take away from *Who's Your City* the importance of selecting the right place for them—large region, small community or even rural location.

To compete in a rapidly changing global economy, smaller Southern communities have to continue to increase their connectivity to their respective mega region; it's crucial for long-term success. As I explained in *Who's Your City*, economic activity is concentrating a select group of mega regions. Worldwide there are just forty significant mega regions, which are home to one-fifth of the world's population, two-thirds of the global economic output and eighty-five percent of all worldwide innovation. Mega regions like Char-lanta, Hou-Orleans, Dal-Austin, and So-Flo are the economic and innovation engines for the Southern half of the U.S.

WS: *Who's Your City?* includes "personality maps" that show the distribution of certain personality traits across the nation. I found it surprising that the South figured so prominently in three of the five maps, with the region boasting concentrations of "extroverted people," "agreeable people," and "conscientious people." (The South was notably lacking "open to experience people," and was only on the outlier for "neurotic people," in Virginia, Kentucky, and parts of North Carolina and Tennessee.)

I realize that your thesis is based on people living in places that match their personalities, but I am curious to know your opinion about where creativity and innovation can best thrive. Does the South lag behind the rest of the nation because our people are so extroverted, agreeable and conscientious?

Or, in other words, do nice guys finish last?

RF: Our team worked with Jason Rentfrow to create to the great personality maps showcased in the book. The maps showcase some interesting trends. Across the U.S. there are five major personality traits: Extroverted People (concentrating in the Midwest and Southeast U.S), Agreeable People (found in the Southeast), Neurotic People (mainly in the Northeast), Conscientious People (primarily in the Southeast U.S.) and Open to Experience People (concentrated in creative centers across the U.S).

I do not think the personalities dictate which cities will finish first or last. What's interesting about these maps is that just like economic forces and occupations, personalities are concentrating in specific area. You look at the strong creative

economies in the South—Nashville, Atlanta, Austin, etc.—these are regions that are filled with extroverted, agreeable and conscientious folks and some of the most innovative centers in the country. These characteristics are not mutually exclusive of each other.

WS: Often, it seems as though progressive, innovative people in the South create small outposts for themselves that least resemble the traditional South. Can our cities retain their Southern character and still offer an environment where creative, well-educated, and diverse people can be happy?

RF: They have to do both. Authenticity, as explained earlier, is critical. Communities have to be authentic to themselves and their character. However, they have to be open and tolerant as well. Economic prosperity relies on cultural, entrepreneurial, civic, scientific, and artistic creativity. Creative workers with these talents need communities, organizations, and peers that are open to new ideas and different people. Southern communities, like all regions and cities, have to be places that are receptive to immigration, alternative lifestyles, and new views on social status and power structures.

WS: Can you tell us about the book you are currently working on, *The Great Reset*?

RF: Given the downturn in the economy, communities, organizations, and individuals have the opportunity to reset our economies, business approaches, and ways of living. My upcoming book describes how the reset and recover happens, how long it takes and what we can expect moving forward.

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