



Bronze "Dancer" sculpture in the lobby of the Fisher Theatre | Marvin Shaouni

Man Behind the Creative Class Stats Shares Ideas on Detroit

By: Terry Parris Jr.



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Harpers Ferry, West Va., sits where the Shenandoah River disappears into the rushing, Washington, D.C.-bound Potomac. A couple hundred years ago, the city's location at the confluence of the onetime heavily traveled Shenandoah and Potomac rivers left it poised for tremendous growth. Harpers Ferry was a crossroads for those going West. It could have been a Chicago – maybe even bigger – but then innovation happened. Railroads buried boats, rivers for shipping or traveling West weren't needed, and Harpers Ferry disappeared. As of 2000, Harpers Ferry had a little over 300 residents.





This is how the "Official Statistician of the Creative Class," [Kevin Stolarick](#), prefaces his question, "Can a city die?"

It's a cold morning in downtown Windsor. Stolarick is sipping a piping hot cup of coffee at a wobbly table inside a corporate coffee shop near his hotel. Less than a half-mile away is Detroit. You can see the river and a sliver of the skyline if you stand in the middle of the street. "That's really the question, isn't it?" He says. "Can the same thing that happened to Harpers Ferry happen here?"

Stolarick spends a lot of time thinking about cities, the people who live there, and why they live there. He works closely with "Creative Class" guru and urban studies theorist [Richard Florida](#) -- both of whom were just in town for Detroit's Creative Cities Summit -- and Stolarick's fingerprints are found on every stat and chart in the theorist's books and studies. Stolarick is also the research director of [The Martin Prosperity Institute](#), the world's leading think-tank on the role of location, place and region in economic prosperity, at the University of Toronto.

So, amid population loss, an industry shift and an economy in flux, what changes are coming to America's post-industrial landscape? Could Detroit, or any other city between Pittsburgh and Chicago, go the way of Harpers Ferry? "The scary thing is if something like this is going to happen, it's going to happen on the other side of that river," Stolarick says from his Windsor vantage point.

Ouch. But the bell is not tolling for Detroit just yet. Stolarick says that post-industrial cities like Detroit can live and thrive; they just have to ask the right questions to get moving in the right direction, stay away from the wrong answers, and start investing in people.

"It's not just one thing," he says. "Solutions require shotguns, not rifles." (That's a figure of speech, ahem.)

"Everybody wants a silver bullet. I always hear, 'We just need an aerotropolis. We just need a tech center.' (Cities go after these 'silver bullets,' and silver bullets are the wrong things. If you put all your money and effort into one thing that you copied from another city, you will ultimately fail."

Cities can't afford to be one-hit wonders, he says.

"Like this idea of economic development by bike path," Stolarick says, with a smirk. "Cities say, 'If we only had more bike paths than we'd be a better city. They would attract the creative class and we'd be OK.' 'We just need to be cool and we'd be OK.' 'We just need more gay neighborhoods and we'd be OK.' That's a dramatic over simplification."



It takes more than a gay village

This idea of being "cool" and "creative," Stolarick says, takes more than just bike paths and gay neighborhoods. "There are a lot of different answers for different cities. Sure, bike paths and gay neighborhoods help. It shows more diversity and tolerance, but there needs to be a balance performance between that tolerance, a high tech base, and a good talent pool." Don't forget the bohemians, the artists, the musicians, and a little gentrification, and voila! There is a new economy city.



Unfortunately, most city governments are still stuck in the mindset of bricks and mortar and smokestacks. They are not thinking about the investment in a city's greatest resource -- the people, Stolarick says. They haven't shifted their mindset with the population. People used to define themselves by their firms or companies, the statistician says. Now people define themselves by their jobs. It's a shift from industry to individual, looking at individual occupations and not entire industries.

"It used to be if you asked someone what they did they would tell you where they worked," he says. "Now if you asked someone what they do they will tell you what their occupation

is."

Michigan's "[Cool Cities](#)" initiative, launched in 2003 by Gov. Jennifer Granholm with help from Richard Florida, took the principles of the Creative Class – "hot" jobs, attractive and lively downtowns, young talented people – and applied them to cities, including Detroit, Flint, Ypsilanti, Hamtramck, and Ferndale.

"There are some really nice things about 'Cool Cities,'" Stolarick says. "The nice thing is that people are on the ground, in the city where they live, initiating whatever program to better their own community, that's the strongest thing about the program."

Buckeye model

Stolarick says cities like Detroit should take a look at what [Youngstown, Ohio](#), is doing. Youngstown looked into their future – population loss, brain drain, industry shift – and developed around that.

"They asked themselves, 'How do we manage shrinkage?'" Stolarick says that's the right question to ask. "They said, 'We know we're getting smaller but how do we do that smartly?'" Youngstown, about 60 miles northwest of Pittsburgh, was traditionally referred to as the center of America's steel industry. As the steel industry collapsed, it was thought that the city wasn't far behind. Between 1960 and 2000 Youngstown lost half of its population.

The city came together with a vision and a plan. It's called [Youngstown 2010](#), and it's committed to not only accepting their shrinking population but defining a new economy and shedding the old, steel town, "broken windows" image. The city began tearing down abandoned buildings and bought out residents in thinly populated neighborhoods. They also developed a Youngstown Business Incubator to assist and accelerate the growth of tech-based startups; the incubator also demolished vacant buildings to accommodate more space needed for incoming businesses. Youngstown is now poised for growth and completely redefining itself. The downtown, once a mirror of the city's economic depression, is now viewed as an urban, post-industrial model of forward-thinking and economic growth.



"The real future of the city is going to come from places that understand that urban policy is not social policy -- it's economic," Stolarick says. "People always think urban is social. (They say urban policy is) about neighborhood development, helping black people get to work on the bus better, or transit issues – all this social stuff, this big L liberal or big D Democrat social stuff. It's not. The city that really pulls away is the one that understands that urban policy is the economy."



Harpers Ferry didn't make it. Youngstown is stabilizing. Chicago is doing just fine. And Detroit, Stolarick says, needs some work.

In Stolarick's POV, solutions to saving or growing or stabilizing a city are branches to a tree, fingers to a hand. It's not one thing, but it's several. It involves understanding a changing economy, understanding what urban policy really is. It's about designers and writers and artists and musicians. It's about talented, innovative people living in the city with public transportation and a savings and checking account. The answer is all of the above.

Or, as Stolarick puts it: "It's chicken and eggs happening

at the same time."

Terry Parris Jr. writes for Model D. Send feedback [here](#).

Photos:

Construction continues on I75, near the Ambassador Bridge.

Michigan Central Depot

Mercury Bar

Kevin Stanislawski, aka "Slaw", in his studio at the Russell Industrial Center

Honey Bee

All photographs by Detroit Photographer [Marvin Shaouni](#)
Marvin Shaouni is the Managing Photographer for [Metromode](#) & [Model D](#).

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