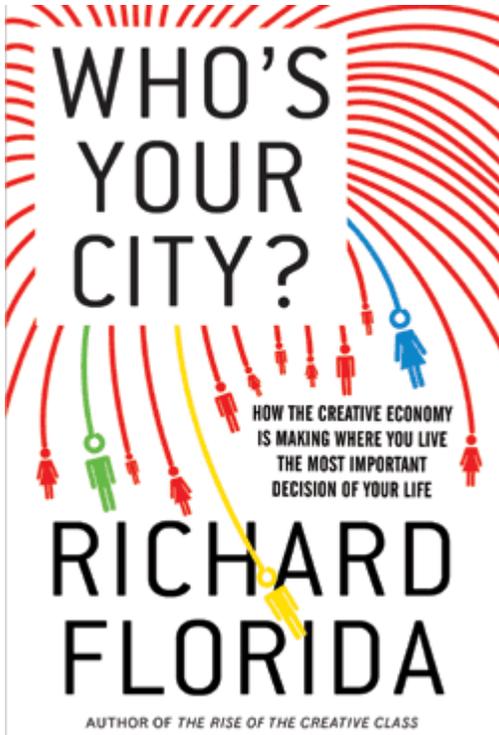


Urban Theorist Richard Florida: DFW's Doing OK But Has "Room For Improvement"

By Pete Freedman in [News You Can Actually Use, Actually](#)



Those familiar with the finds published in his books *The Rise of the Creative Class* and *Who's Your City?* weren't necessarily inundated with a wealth of new material to ponder during Richard Florida's talk at the University of Texas at Arlington on Friday night. But at the debut speech of the school's [2009 Maverick Speaker Series](#) (which will see CNN political pundits David Gergen and Jeffrey Toobin, among others, visiting the campus in the coming months), audiences were still treated to a riveting monologue, one infused with personal anecdotes from Florida's own life experiences and with a few thoughts on the Dallas-Fort Worth region and the challenges facing it as it moves forward.

That, of course, is Florida's area of expertise; whereas many cultural geographers of the day have become enamored of the idea of the shrinking world and its coupled concept of globalization, Florida has instead aimed his studies in the opposite direction. A renowned so-called "urban theorist" -- specifically for this very reason -- Florida argues that, as the world becomes more and more interwoven, one's sense of place and home is as important as ever.

Hence, then, Florida's concept of the three T's, the three things most vital to creating a city that is at once appreciated by its residents and, more importantly, economically viable, with jobs and companies aplenty: They are, in no particular order: Technology, Talent, Tolerance. (When necessary, though, feel free to add a fourth "T," as in "Territorial Assets," referring to a region's physical attributes and beauty--Florida did as his lecture progressed.) Though it wasn't the main focus of his talk, Florida did share some of DFW's rankings in his study of the "Three T's," as applied to a total of 350 metropolitan areas researched ...

All in all, not too, too bad stuff: Technologically speaking, DFW ranks 7th; talent-wise, 17th; and in tolerance, a surprisingly high 23rd. No ranking was offered on DFW's territorial assets, although, c'mon, have you *seen* those artistic renderings of the Trinity River's proposed development and the Woodall Rogers deck park?

"You're doing real well," Florida offered. "But the encouraging thing is that there's room for improvement."

That's another area of promise, actually, for the region--the physical growth. In what came as a surprise to a large portion of the room, the city of Arlington, Florida shared, has surpassed Florida's former home of Pittsburgh in population. The reason? Simple enough, it boils down to factors that pre-date Florida's own research; every city has "push" and "pull" factors, when added up, they often show an unbalanced weight in one direction over the other. As an example, Florida cited former Yahoo! competitor Lycos, which had been based in Pittsburgh for a time, but eventually moved to Boston (which, ironically, Florida had as well, despite his own affection for the Rust Belt city). While working at Harvard, Florida opened up the daily paper one morning to find a headline announcing that Lycos was changing homes.

"That headline changed my life," Florida said, explaining how it influenced his research.

How, again, reverts to the "Three T's." Although the City of Pittsburgh had done a commendable job of re-branding itself as a technological center in the wake of its industrial loss (thanks to the research labs of Carnegie Mellon and the University of Pittsburgh), Lycos was moving not because it was cheaper to operate out of Boston, but rather because that's where the talent it hoped to tap into was located--and that talent, Florida learned in desperate phone calls to his friends back in Pittsburgh, had no desire to up and move to western Pennsylvania. In essence, a failing in one "T" had precluded Pittsburgh's growth with another--hence the model Florida conjured.

It's important, however, to have a solid grasp on what Florida means by "Talent" -- and to do so, you have to go back to his greater concept of the creative class. Basically: It's not just academics; creativity in one realm spawns creativity in another, and the creative spark knows no artistic medium. In an anecdote about Seattle, Florida used the example of the Jimi Hendrix Experience Music Project, built by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen as an homage of sorts to his inspirational source. Consider that one big swoop of all three T's: Microsoft's technological savvy, Allen's own talent for business, and both Allen and

Seattle's tolerance to the idea that the city's other cultures are as important to its vitality as anything else.

Point is, they're all interconnected. And though Florida, an expert on urban theory, but not necessarily on DFW's own issues (research numbers aside), spoke encouragingly, if vaguely, when addressing the region's future, those about the room with a sense of its current climate visibly and skeptically frowned at the prospects--especially considering the region's tolerance of [musical talents](#) and [alternative lifestyles](#) of late, just to name a few of the issues.

And rightfully so. Tech-wise DFW is A-OK. Talent-wise it could use some improvement -- which the area, if Florida's theories hold water, will see if it also improves its tolerance levels. Ranking 23rd in that realm may be an encouraging sign, perhaps -- but God help the following 327 regions, if we're the model of metropolitan consistency there.

Still plenty to stew on -- and plenty to nerd out on for cultural geography dweebs like myself. Florida's ideas are no doubt his own findings' lowest common denominator of how to assess a city, as there are, of course, other factors (hence his own addition of the fourth "T"). But for the time being, they're the most progressive and thought-provoking around. Especially, when applied to our own regional prospects.