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Building Back?

Richard Florida outlines his vision for a 'post-pandemic city'

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America's central business districts suffered greatly during the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) through job losses and business closings, but they also have a good chance to recover if stakeholders can capitalize on trends that will shape the way people live and work in a post-pandemic economy. That's the view of author and urbanist Richard Florida, a professor at the University of Toronto and author of [The Rise of the Creative Class](#) and [The New Urban Crisis](#).

In a recent address to the [Downtown Partnership of Baltimore](#), Florida laid out his vision for how central business districts can bounce back from economic setbacks caused by the pandemic and efforts to control it through lockdowns and restrictions on public gatherings.

Despite what the naysayers warn about an urban exodus, "this is not the end of cities," Florida said in a virtual talk to business and civic leaders. "I have no doubt that our cities and our downtowns will come back."

But because of the health crisis and other forces, including the [Black Lives Matter movement](#), it won't be enough for cities simply to return to the way things used to be, he added.

The areas that do best, he said, will be those that can satisfy the needs and wants that people have in the post-pandemic era—and that means [responding to changes in the way people use and think about cities](#).

“I think what we are going through is a great urban reset and it's not just the pandemic. It's a series of overlapping crises,” he said. “We have a once-in-a-lifetime, no, once-in-a-century opportunity, to build our communities, our cities, back better. We are beginning a fundamental reset in the way we work and the way we live and the way we shop and how we go about our everyday lives.”

Florida said he has been studying central business districts and their prospects for recovering as more people get vaccinated and businesses reopen. He's heard [the dire warnings that cities may not recover](#) because people from now on “will all just be working remotely in far-off places and connecting on Zoom.”

Florida doesn't believe it will play out that way. He said the current health crisis is not so much a [disruptor but an accelerator of trends](#) that were already underway, including the back-to-the-cities movement following the urban flight to the suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s.

Florida said he sees two sets of factors reshaping the way people live now: A set of ‘pull’ factors that are pulling certain groups away from urban centers (and have gotten attention from the death-of-cities prognosticators), and a set of ‘push’ factors that are drawing people back to cities.

The pull factors primarily pertain to people who would have moved out of cities eventually anyway, including families with young children, older people, and “the vulnerable.” He noted that college students also were pulled away from cities when urban campuses were closed for public health reasons, but he considers that a temporary shift.

One ‘push’ factor that can benefit downtowns now is that many young people who temporarily moved to the suburbs to live with their parents during the pandemic are “flooding back to cities” after hunkering down and getting bored with life on Zoom.

Before COVID, Florida said, highly educated people aged 25-to-34 accounted for more than half of the population increase in urban cores. He said that includes recent college graduates and others just getting established in their careers.

“History shows that young people flow back to cities in the wake of pandemics because of the job opportunities, the better wage they provide, but also in the current day because that's the place to meet and mate and date other young people,” said Florida.

Another ‘push’ factor is that companies in certain fields can't function at their best when employees work remotely. Florida mentioned high-tech, health care, innovation, finance, media,

and entertainment: “They can’t be done on Zoom, and they can’t be done in a stretched-out way.”

In fact, many employers have held off hiring young talent until the health crisis is over because they believe new employees need “proximity” for training, team building, and mentoring.

In the near future, said Florida, “expect to see a big rush to hire young people. That’s coming in the next few months... Expect to see a rush back to [the need for downtown offices](#) to get young people in the mix, to get them mentored, to get them onboarded.”

As a corollary to young people coming back to work in central business districts, he said, “I think we’re going to see quite quickly that walkable and bikeable areas close to the core and close to these clusters are going to become even more desirable,” because that’s where people will want to live and spend time.

Many employees, especially members of the creative class, will be looking at work settings differently in the post-pandemic city, Florida said.

One of the biggest changes involves the way people want to do their jobs, especially if they work in fields such as technology, science, and the arts.

More and more, employees who have a choice want to be in a “hybrid” situation in which they can work from home part of the time and come to a workplace part of the time.

“The big shift we’re talking about today is remote work,” Florida said. “We can’t push that under the rug. We have to adapt to it.”

According to Florida, before the pandemic, “between 2-and-15 percent of the workforce were working remotely.” Currently, it’s “half-to-two-thirds of the workforce.”

Florida said his research indicates that 70 percent of employees who are considered professional or ‘creative class’ workers are in favor of a hybrid model.

For many creatives, “remote work is a perk and a privilege,” Florida said. “It’s going to be used by companies to lure top talent...Capital will follow talent, and the places that attract and retain talent will win.”

Employers seeking top talent, in turn, know that offering flexibility can make them more attractive to prospective employees.

As for company work settings themselves, “the office is going to change, but it’s not dead,” Florida said. “It’s only dead as a cubicle space to work. People can work from anywhere now.

But ... we still need an arena for social interaction. We need offices that will entice workers back to work.”

While older office workers may want to work remotely because they have established networks and perhaps families to care for, younger workers in particular “need to be in a workspace to learn more, to be acculturated.”

As workers return or are hired many companies will need more spaces that support collaboration, as opposed to solitary activities, and new kinds of spaces, including settings he called “signature co-working space.”

In many urban areas, he said, office designers are exploring ways to add outdoor spaces that promote collaboration, in some cases by opening upper-level offices to balconies and terraces that overlook the street.

“Seventy percent of workers, seventy percent of managers find that the office environment is the place that’s conducive to team building, to social interaction,” he said. “The office will be increasingly a space for interaction, increasingly a space not only to work but to meet your colleagues and will be a space that’s indoor-outdoor.”

In retail, too, he added, the pandemic has caused significant changes as people become accustomed to buying more basic products online.

“The pandemic will reshape retail,” said Florida. “There’s no going back to the old ways. There’s been a shift away from commodity retail to shopping as an experience. When you’re thinking about downtown, that means unique, local, curated, food, coffee, restaurants, shopping, more space for outdoor dining, moving things we used to do indoors on the street. When people talk about the big change that they love in cities, it’s been outside.”

The combined result of these shifts, and another opportunity for downtowns, is that “the office is no longer a building,” he said.

“The neighborhood, the city, the downtown itself has become the new office, and I think this is the critical point that all of us need to remember.”

People “don’t need to go to an office to plug in their laptop and tap on the keys,” said Florida. “They need to go somewhere to interact and build teams and forge collaboration and network with others. That means the district or the neighborhood. Maybe it’s not even a central business district anymore. Maybe it’s a neighborhood business district. But you need places to meet. You need third spaces—restaurants, offices, [coffee shops, health and fitness places, wellness spaces, actively-curated, reimagined third places.](#)”

The nature of time spent at the office, and the experience of going to the office, is changing too.

“A day at the office no longer becomes a day *in* the office,” he said. “It becomes something more akin to a local business trip where you go to the office for a meeting, you go to meet someone for coffee, you go back to the office, you have another meeting, you go to lunch, and so on.”

These changes are part of an evolution Florida calls ‘The Death and Life of the Central Business District’ – a nod to the urbanist Jane Jacobs and her 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

“We are seeing the death of an old central business district but, out of the ashes, the creation of a new one,” he said.

“The old central business district, which was a set of office towers where people commuted to and worked to process information – they were stacked and packed like a factory for office and professional work – that central business district is going away.”

“There’s going to be a 20 percent reduction in the demand for central office space and maybe a 5-to-10 percent hit to central business district economies. But even most of these remote work jobs are in the urban centers, and most will stay there.”

Where many people are moving, he said, “is not the office district per se, but it’s the areas surrounding the office district—sometimes by a university, sometimes by a park, sometimes in the case of [Baltimore](#) near the waterfront.”

Two economists from Philadelphia have dubbed regions that are adjacent to a central business district ‘[Central Recreational Districts](#),’ he said.

“It’s not midtown Manhattan. It’s SoHo and Tribeca and Chelsea. I could go on. What we have the opportunity to do is shift away from individual office buildings in a cluster to an actively-curated central interaction district or central social interaction district or neighborhood-leveraged business district—a CBD, a downtown which is much more about live-work neighborhoods.”

This is a trend that has been going on for the past two decades and it promises to continue as cities emerge from the pandemic, he said.

“The Baltimore CBD, Philadelphia CBD, New York CBD. Newark, New Jersey CBD, have all been becoming more live-work, more mixed-use, more vibrant. Now we have a chance to even double down and accelerate this trend.”

One byproduct, he said, will be new life for previously “dead” outdoor spaces.

“We’re taking back streets from moving and storing cars to more active uses. We’re putting dining, fitness, bike lanes, we’re even putting working and learning, outside.”

One need will be for cities to invest more in green spaces and actively ‘program’ open spaces to encourage people to use them. While young people are surging back to cities on their own, said Florida, tourists, and families may need more coaxing in the form of concerts and other events.

Because of the government lockdowns for public health reasons, he said, “there’s not the usual tourism. There’s not the usual workers. There’s not the usual street life. In that vacuum, there is a lot of risk-taking behavior, some of which is crime. So, we have to really intentionally now program, not just activate, but program” public spaces.

“This is a time[...] to program the downtown with activities that draw back families, that draw in tourists, that mix it up again so it’s not just the risk-taking and the risk-oblivious that are coming back downtown, so that it’s a whole range of people,” he said. “I like to call this not just the downtown bounce-back but a chance for us throughout our cities to build a whole series of complete communities.”

The result can be more balanced regions, he said.

“If our suburbs have been massively tilted to dormitory living and sleeping, our downtowns have been a little bit over-tilted towards work.” Post-pandemic, “we can create more mixed-use, more residential, more vibrant, more active, more education-oriented downtowns...

“I think what we can see is a post-pandemic geography which is less a downtown that’s about work and suburbs that are about sleeping, and a blending and merger, where the downtown is more about work than life and the suburbs are more about living than working, but there’s a blending, and our whole metropolitan area becomes a federation of distributed complete communities.”

Florida said cities also need to be careful to invest in changes that promote social equity and diversity and don’t just benefit the wealthy. After the influenza pandemic of 1918 and 1919, he said, the Roaring 20s was a period of “vibrancy and innovation” for cities but also “tremendous inequity” along race and class lines.

[Following last year’s demonstrations for police reform and social equity](#), he said, there has been an “outpouring of popular enthusiasm for building back in a more equitable and just way,” especially with economic stimulus funding from the Biden administration.

But “if we don’t intervene and we’re not intentional, most of its benefits will go to the already advantaged,” warned Florida.

“Will we take the opportunity to build better, more inclusive, healthier, and resilient downtowns and places? The choice is ours.”