The
Coming of
the
Creative
Class

By Philip Langdon

Tall, genial, and brimming with demographic insights into 21st century America, Florida stood in a partly renovated building in downtown Providence in mid-May, smiling upon a gathering of his kind of people—those he has dubbed the "creative class."
SMALL-SIZE CITIES
CREATIVITY RANKINGS

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Top Ten Cities</th>
<th>Creativity Index</th>
<th>Percent of Creative Workers</th>
<th>Creative Rank</th>
<th>High-Tech Rank</th>
<th>Innovation Rank</th>
<th>Diversity Rank</th>
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<tr>
<td>1 Madison, Wis.</td>
<td>925</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Des Moines, Iowa</td>
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<td>4 Melbourne, Fla.</td>
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<td>5 Boise City, Idaho</td>
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<td>6 Huntsville, Ala.</td>
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<td>7 Lansing, Mich.</td>
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In The Rise of the Creative Class, Florida writes, “The emerging geography of the Creative Class is dramatically affecting the competitive advantage of regions across the United States.” Check the book or Florida’s website to see how your city stacks up.

Florida is the H. John Heinz III Professor of Regional Economic Development at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, but the 44-year-old academic spends much of his time hopping from city to city, explaining why our economic future favors certain kinds of places. What powers the U.S. economy today is technology, creativity, and innovation, he says. Innovative people—a crucial component of the American workforce—are choosy.

Many of them avoid locales where lifestyles are hemmed in by rigid corporate hierarchies or a pervasive conformity. They want to live and work, Florida says, in stimulating, diverse, “authentic” places such as Seattle, Boston, the San Francisco Bay Area, the Washington, D.C., area, and Austin, Texas.

A stagnant, ingrown city like Providence, which has beautiful old buildings and close-in colleges and universities but which suffers from a shortage of entrepreneurs, could, with effort, attract innovators and thus assure its future prosperity. That’s the essence of what Florida told city leaders, including Mayor Vincent Cianci, Jr., who met with him during his May visit. The mayor was taking an after-hours respite from his corruption trial in federal court.

Survival of the talented
Florida argues in his new book, The Rise of the Creative Class, that cities cannot flourish unless they attract a particular kind of person, the creative individual. According to him, the creative class is made up of two broad categories.

The “supercreative core” consists of 15 million individuals, principally “people in science and engineering, architecture and design, education, arts, music and entertainment, whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology and/or new creative content,” Florida says.

The second category is the “creative professionals.” This group is 23 million strong and consists of individuals in business and finance, law, health care, and related fields who “engage in complex problem solving that involves a great deal of independent judgment and requires high levels of education or human capital.”

Altogether, says Florida, who distributes his views regularly in columns for Information Week, “some 38 million Americans, 30 percent of all employed people, belong to this new class.” Since 1980, their number has more than doubled.

Creativity, which he defines as the ability to create meaningful new forms, is now “the decisive source of competitive advantage,” he maintains. The average American might think that creativity and people with the requisite skills and imagination, can reside almost anywhere. But according to Florida, creativity blossoms only in very specific climates. Some of the most prolific creators of new ideas and improved products and services, he says, are individuals who look odd or behave peculiarly. They feel squelched when stuck in places that disdain mavericks or when working for rigidly hierarchical companies.

Public officials and economic development agencies do their communities a disservice by focusing narrowly on fostering a good “business climate,” Florida says. Instead, governments and development agencies should be asking, “What would it take to have a great people climate?”

Because creative people gravitate toward stimulating environments rich with differences, Florida sees the proportion of gays, bohemians, and non-mainstream individuals in the population as a prime indicator of whether a city will nurture creativity. A place that aspires to enjoy the economic and cultural benefits of creativity must first of all be lively and open, he argues. Its physical and social environment should be imbued with character and distinctiveness.

It makes little sense to spend public funds on sports stadiums, he says. Creative individuals are more likely to be excited by bike trails, a lively street-level culture, and other participatory elements of the everyday envi-
Racking Up Points

Sixteen cities and counties (and one state) across the country are taking Creative Class author Richard Florida’s advice seriously. They are members of the Creative City Project sponsored by Partners for Livable Communities, a nonprofit group based in Washington, D.C.

Participants include 12 cities: Charlotte, North Carolina; Indianapolis, Indiana; Kansas City, Missouri; Louisville, Kentucky; Oakland, California; Orlando, Florida; Roanoke, Virginia; Rochester, New York; San Jose, California; St. Louis, Missouri; St. Paul, Minnesota; and Ventura, California.

The three counties are Marquette County in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula; Shelby County, Tennessee, which includes Memphis; and Prince George’s County, Maryland, part of the Washington, D.C., suburban area. The state of Maryland is also involved.

“We started this project a year ago because we see encouraging creativity as an important economic development tool,” says Partners president Robert McNulty. “It’s a way to enhance livability, and that should be a central objective for every city making the transition to the new economy. Our project is aimed at helping to develop a general framework for creativity and then to come up with specific projects to put that framework into action,” he says.

At a Creative City workshop in Florida last January, Richard Florida spoke of the “great myth” that technology would make “place” irrelevant. “Place is fundamentally more important now than it ever was,” he said. It’s what draws creative people to a city. And the places that are most successful, he noted, are those that are most tolerant of “bohemians,” of racial and ethnic diversity, and of sexual orientation.

For some Creative City participants, that description was too narrow, McNulty says. Some questioned whether Florida’s creative index gave enough weight to social equity. “Does everyone have the same chance to be creative,” one participant asked.

To fill the gap, says McNulty, the 16 cities have agreed to develop their own set of indexes, or livability/creativity audits and to look closer at equity issues. At a meeting in April in Louisville, the project participants hammered out some specifics of what it means to be a creative city that will attract enterprising young people. That could mean developing new downtown attractions like Louisville’s “extreme sports park,” providing artists’ housing, as Oakland is doing, revitalizing neighborhoods, or boosting regional marketing efforts.

In the program’s second year, St. Paul will become a sort of national laboratory, says McNulty, a model for a socially equitable creative city. To that end, low-income housing is on the agenda. There will also be an emphasis on the city’s cultural strengths, including its many colleges and universities, he says.

The culmination of the two-year project will be a guide to becoming a creative city and a resource base on local best practices. “We’ll be looking at the relationship of amenities, creativity, technology, and e-commerce to the globally competitive region and its ability to attract the best and the brightest,” says McNulty.

Ruth Knack, AICP

Knack is the executive editor of Planning.

Roanoke, Virginia(top), is part of the Partners for Livable Communities Creative City Project. So is Marquette, Michigan, where high school students are helping to renovate an historic lighthouse.

Lessons from Newark

Florida’s interest in creativity was sown during his boyhood in Newark, when he visited the factory where his father, Louis, a son of Italian immigrants, made eyeglass frames. The business prospered, Florida says, because its workers used their intelligence and skills. Several years later, the company switched to a top-down system of management, which proved disastrous. It caused skilled, self-motivated people to quit and ultimately sent the business into bankruptcy.

Florida says his experience in Pittsburgh, where he has taught since 1987, has spurred him to think in greater depth about why some regions thrive while others stagnate. Pennsylvania as a whole is “kind of trapped by its older mentalities and attitudes.” Pittsburgh struggles with lingering old attitudes, as evidenced by its decision to raze the remains of
the Homestead steel plant to build "a generic low-end shopping mall." A decision like that turns off creative people, who are stimulated by authentic elements of history and the built environment.

Another example: Lycos, an Internet catalog and search company founded by Carnegie Mellon researchers, moved to Boston in the late 1990s because that city "offered life-style options that made it much easier to attract top managerial and technical talent."

As a result of his research and observations, Florida has distilled numerous pieces of advice for civic and government leaders, and for planners. Here are a few:

- "Cities and communities would be far better served by investing in their universities than in downtown buildings or stadium projects. You’re never going to create the leadership of a high-tech powerhouse without great universities. This is the equivalent of your infrastructure and your raw materials."
- "The university is a life-style district," so cities should do everything possible to make the area around a university a "seamless walkable community" that possesses the character and amenities that creative people value. Strengthen what’s unique about these neighborhoods. "Don’t genericize them." Creative individuals work at odd hours, so the neighborhood should have establishments that are open very late.
- "Go out and ask people what they want. I am amazed at how my colleagues don’t ask people what they want. Organize sessions at local colleges and universities asking, 'What do you want in a place to live and work?' and force the political leadership to go."
- Develop strategies to attract and retain "human capital and educational capital—people with a BA and above." As part of this, "get young professionals and college students doing projects." Examples include musical events, architectural undertakings, all-night bar-a-ramas, and art installations. "You’re going to allow the creative class to validate itself."
- Preserve and enhance whatever about a place is authentic. Pittsburgh is authentic by virtue of its rivers, its industrial heritage, its culture, even its office buildings, in Florida's view.

What’s encouraging, he says, is that with proper attention, a city or region can greatly boost its standing in creative and economic rankings. "A Memphis could shoot up, especially if it sees itself as a research catchment area for a territory extending to Little Rock and Jackson."

"When Austin, Texas, can make it to second place, anybody can make it," he says. A generation ago, he notes, Austin didn’t loom large on the national economic map, but the city had assets such as the University of Texas, a music and nightlife scene, and interesting landscape features. "Austin leadership acted very strategically on those assets."

Florida rates all U.S. metropolitan areas of more than 250,000 on a "creativity index," which he regards as the most accurate gauge of each area’s ability to generate new ideas, high-tech businesses, and regional growth. The index reflects four factors: the proportion of the creative class in a region’s workforce; innovation, measured as patents per person; the prevalence of high-tech industry; and diversity, measured as the percentage of gay couples.

Metropolitan San Francisco ranks highest on this index, with Austin in second place. San Diego and Boston tie for third, followed by Seattle.

A question or two
Like any ambitious undertaking, Florida’s work inspires qualms on some matters. The Washington, D.C., area, cited by Florida as an economic model, strikes many observers as conformist rather than loose and open. Some doubt whether the creative class is as numerous nationally as Florida estimates it to be.

"I think it’s an exaggeration to say there are 38 million creative individuals," says Kip Bergstrom, executive director of the Rhode Island Economic Policy Council. "It’s a stretch to call underwriters and actuaries part of the creative class," as Florida does.

Nonetheless, Bergstrom happily introduced Florida at a book-signing party in downtown Providence in May because he senses that the man from Carnegie Mellon is onto something important and useful. "This is the fourth time we’ve had Florida here," says Bergstrom. "We like him."

Philip Langdon, a frequent contributor to Planning, is the author of A Better Place to Live: Redesigning the American Suburb, published in 1994. He lives in New Haven, 27th out of 316 primary metropolitan statistical areas in Florida’s creative index.

Resources