



AUTHOR INTERVIEWS

Author Richard Florida On 'The New Urban Crisis'

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Heard on Morning Edition

Steve Inskeep talks to author Richard Florida — who has made a career studying cities, both culturally and economically. Florida's new book is called *The New Urban Crisis*.

STEVE INSKEEP, HOST:

One of the most influential thinkers about cities is rethinking.

RACHEL MARTIN, HOST:

Richard Florida promotes what he calls the creative class. He has said for years that cities prosper when they attract upscale innovators and entrepreneurs. Make your city a place where the creative class wants to live, and they, in turn, will create jobs.

INSKEEP: Many cities followed that advice. And now Richard Florida faces the downside. The creative class, he says, is creating cities that are massively unequal.

RICHARD FLORIDA: ...Which is terrifying to me. The middle class in this country has declined. But, more importantly to me, the middle-class neighborhoods, those platforms for the American dream, have been decimated.

INSKEEP: The number of middle-class neighborhoods has declined as some people get richer and others poorer. In a new book, Richard Florida identifies why he thinks this happens in places like New York or San Francisco. When upscale people move in,

they drive up housing prices. It gets to the point where other people have little money left after the housing bill.

FLORIDA: The blue-collar service worker has 10 or 20,000. So these people are being pushed out of these metropolitan areas entirely.

INSKEEP: Wait a minute. Is that money they have left over after paying the rent or the mortgage?

FLORIDA: Yes. And I think that's the right metric to look at.

INSKEEP: And that metric is especially bad in big, progressive, otherwise successful cities. Those cities are often led by Democratic mayors who criticize inequality. Richard Florida's book, "The New Urban Crisis," offers suggestions for what they should do.

Have progressive policies failed those places?

FLORIDA: I think we've abandoned progressive policies. We've had an incredibly daunting and troubling reaction. I had to rewrite this entire book in the wake of Trump's election. I mentioned, you know, I had called for a federal urban policy. I had called for the newly-elected Democratic administration to appoint a council of cities, you know, of great mayors to deploy federal resources. Of course, none of that will occur now, tragically. And so cities and mayors are left to go it alone.

Cities and their mayors need more power. We turn over a lot of our urban revenue to Washington. And Washington spends it however it does, typically spends it on bolstering areas in other parts of the country. And I think one of the ways to get around this is to devolve power to cities and localities, let them keep more of their tax dollars and address the problems that they have that are unique as they see fit.

INSKEEP: You're sounding more conservative or libertarian there for a moment...

FLORIDA: Well, I think...

INSKEEP: ...Or federalist, let's say federalist.

FLORIDA: I am a Federalist. I'm a localist and a Federalist. But I think my big wake-up call here was the election of Donald Trump. Now, many of my colleagues on the left see our cities as the oppositional force against Trump - sanctuary cities fighting to maintain sanctuary status. I think that's right to a point. But I think the bigger point is the only way out of our political divide - this is my Trump wake-up call. The only way to put red and blue America back together again, in this traumatic divide, is to empower local areas so that people in red areas feel like they have control of their community; people in blue areas feel like they have control of their community.

We decided in the 20th century to port more power from the states and localities to the federal government. That was important to do. We were an industrial nation. We were a global power. Now we're an urbanized, clustered, varied-knowledge economy. It's time to use that federalism tool - that federalist tool - and give power back to the states, the cities and localities so that they can solve their own problems as they occur in their localities.

INSKEEP: Now, a number of intriguing implications of that - New York or Los Angeles, if you live there, periodically, someone locally will calculate the tax dollars that New York, say, sends to Washington. And they will often point out that New York pays more in taxes than it gets back from the federal government. And the money goes to Alabama or Montana or wherever it may go, more rural areas typically. Are you saying that we should, as a country, cut off the rural areas a little bit and let cities keep more of their money for themselves?

FLORIDA: I think that we have in this country subsidized outlying areas. We've massively subsidized growth in the suburbs, from mortgaged interest tax deductions to subsidized highways. Now it's time, I think, to let cities and states and people solve their own problems.

It's a tough pill to swallow. And it's not just from the economic point of view. It's from the social and cultural point of view, from the point of view of civil rights, gay rights, women's rights. But I don't think there's any way around it. I mean, I think it's the only way to unleash our economic potential. And I call it move from winner-take-all urbanism to a new era of urbanism for all.

INSKEEP: OK, let's talk about that. You would like cities to be doing more to attack income inequality that they've helped to create because they're successful, because they attract people who drive up the prices. What are some things that cities can do to build themselves in a more equitable way?

FLORIDA: We have to make a commitment to building affordable housing because what's getting built in New York and in Los Angeles and San Francisco and what is causing the backlash is luxury towers and luxury lofts for the wealthy. Number two, we've got to build more transit. We've got to build transit that connects parts of our cities and parts of our communities - and actually those lagging areas - that connects them to employment centers near the urban core, which is where the best jobs are being created. But the third thing we have to do that's absolutely critical and that very few people are talking about - we have nearly 70 million jobs now in the blue-collar service economy - food preparation, food service, office work, personal care services - the fastest growing jobs in our country.

So I talk in the book about the need to massively increase the minimum wage to take into account the cost of living. So that minimum wage would be higher in New York and San Francisco than it would be in Buffalo or Pittsburgh, of course. As a country, we really spend time and money making manufacturing jobs good jobs. We increase the wages so that people who work in factories could buy the cars and consumer durables coming off the assembly lines. The only way we're going to build a middle class today is to make sure the service workers - 70 million strong, more than roughly half of our workforce - that they have jobs that are middle class jobs. And right now, they're sinking further and further behind.

INSKEEP: Who's going to do that - government, unions, employers, somebody else?

FLORIDA: Well, I had hoped that our federal government would lead here. But now with the Trump election and Republicans in control of both houses, that's impossible. So I think the default for the United States is this progressive group of cities and mayors and urban leaders and philanthropy. And let's hope progressive businesses - the tech companies, the knowledge companies, progressive real estate developers - will get on board with this because we are in such deep trouble with this overblown nation-state and really out of sync with the times. Dysfunctional, imperial presidency - we see

that with Trump in office, but it's been there all along. I really do see cities and local empowerment as probably the only way out of this new urban crisis.

INSKEEP: The latest book by Richard Florida is called "The New Urban Crisis."
Richard, thanks very much.

FLORIDA: Oh, it's a pleasure being with you. Thank you, Steve.

(SOUNDBITE OF ODDISEE'S "BREA")

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