

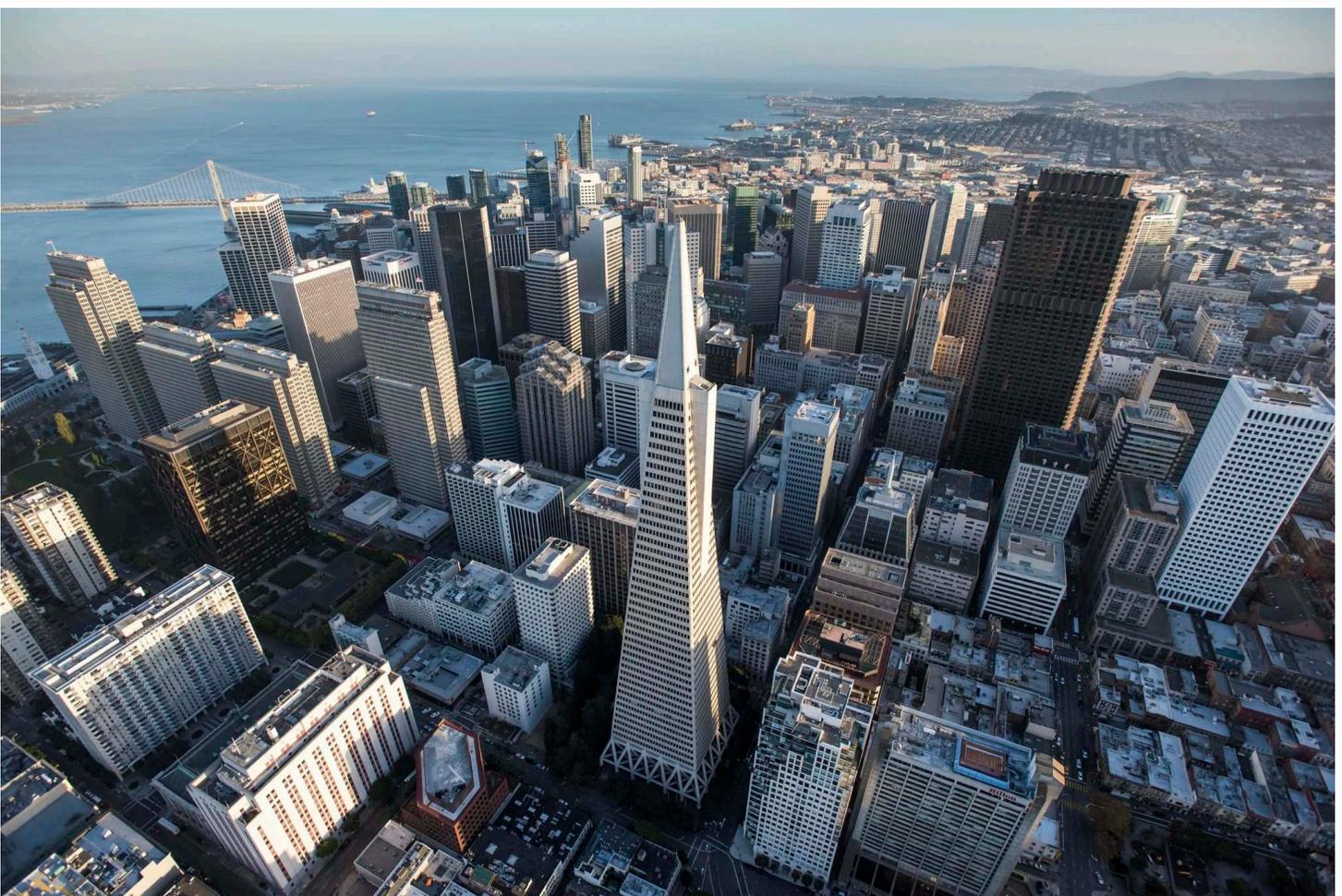
BOOKS

Crisis in reverse

PREVIOUS ERAS SAW POPULATIONS FLEEING URBAN CENTRES -- NOW THEY'RE COMING BACK

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David Paul Morris / Bloomberg files

Cutline here (this is San Francisco BTW).

In *The New Urban Crisis* Richard Florida, an American University professor and current director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto, compellingly and convincingly defines the problems facing today's cities and their suburban counterparts.

During the "old" urban crisis of the 1960s and 1970s, the suburban exodus left city centres hollowed out, poor and crime-ridden. Now, according to Florida, we face the "new" crisis in which the technology, knowledge and creative workers are returning and clustering in central and transit-friendly areas of cities.

While they stimulate unprecedented innovation and economic growth, they also drive up rent and property prices, and monopolize services and economic opportunities.

Interestingly, Florida contends that the media's preoccupation with gentrification takes away focus from the larger issues of growing inequality and concentrated chronic poverty.

His in-depth research looks foremost at income, as well as other disparities, in a range of superstar as well as mid-sized American cities/metro areas, and includes some international cities such as London and, within the Canadian context, Toronto and Vancouver.

Florida's statistics can be overwhelming at times, but they build up to the sobering conclusion that mixed, inclusive, middle-class neighbourhoods are disappearing. He shows how, over the last 20 years, the gap between the well-paid, technology-based and the low-paid, service-industry workers is widening into a troubling urban geography of "small areas of affluence" and "larger areas of poverty."

Suburbs, which after the Second World War drove growth and upward middle-class mobility, are now also stagnating and their crime rates are rising.

While Florida's narrative is always invested and personal, it particularly hits home as he recounts growing up in North Arlington, a suburb of Newark, N.J., and his parents' aspirations in moving his family there.

His awareness of urbanity in popular culture and his references to art and politics also make Florida accessible and allow him to engage a larger audience, as when he muses on the new reality and perception of the suburbs, noting how "[t]he TV series *Breaking Bad* made suburban meth dens as iconic as the urban street corners where drug dealers plied their trade in *The Wire*."

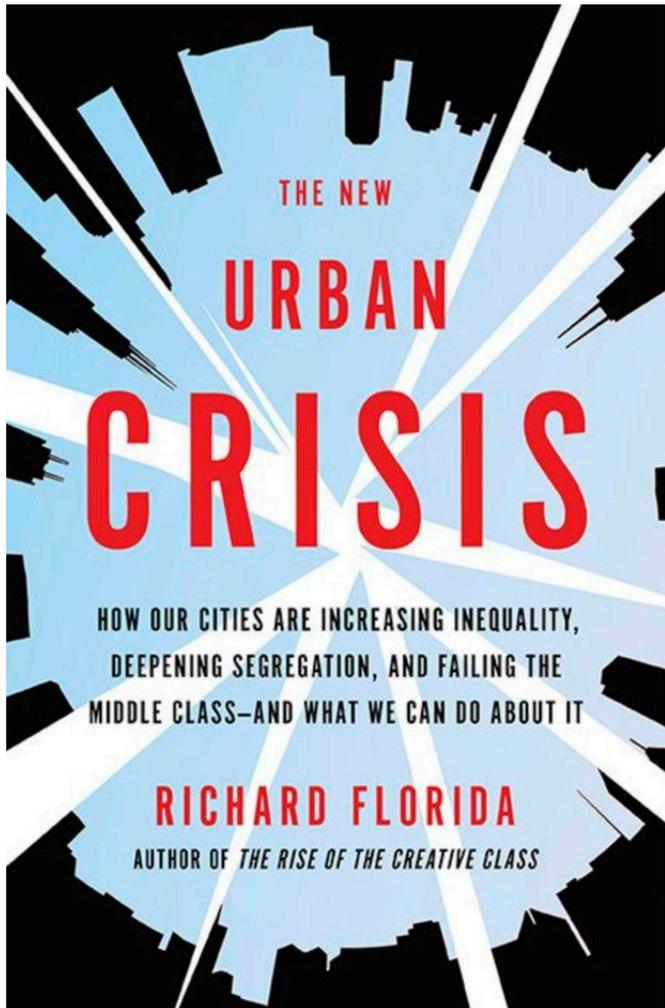
Florida's most valuable contribution, however, is the list of innovative strategies and policies he proposes to combat the growing racial, social and economic segregation and inequality in our cities. Because, he argues, economic inequality "is not only the result of big structural changes in the economy, such as globalization and automation, but also of policy choices — reduction in taxes and welfare benefits, anti-union measures — that have undone the old social compact and eroded the wages of American workers. These choices can be reversed if we choose to do so."

For Florida, the solutions to urban problems lie in more and better-informed urbanism. For example, to make use of clustering he suggests reworking zoning and building codes, and switching from property to land value tax. Another proven way to increase access and density is strategic investment in infrastructure and public transportation.

He radically suggests turning low-wage service jobs into middle-class work by raising minimum wage, encouraging unions and involving more government regulation. He claims this is exactly what happened with manufacturing jobs in the United States after the Second World War. Obviously this kind of investment in people and places will be costly, but Florida explains that a more equal, unsegregated and productive workforce make senses not only morally but economically in the long run.

Florida's book offers a groundbreaking vision for inclusive and prosperous cities and is a call to city dwellers and urban politicians alike to become better-informed and propose and follow through on hard but rewarding choices.

Barbara Romanik resides in Winnipeg and is a fiction writer and an academic interested in urban writing and theory.



The New Urban Crisis: How Our Cities Are Increasing Inequality, Deepening Segregation, and Failing the Middle Class — And What We Can Do About It

By Richard Florida

Basic Books, 336 pages, \$37