

Op-Ed L.A. and New York are expensive, but they're not about to become creative deserts



L.A. boasts more than twice and New York nearly three times the average national concentration of musicians and singers. Above, jazz musicians play on the second floor balcony of the Welcome Inn in Eagle Rock. (Los Angeles Times)

By **Richard Florida**

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“If the 1 percent stifles New York’s creative talent, I’m out of here,” musician David Byrne [threatened](#) several years ago. New York City’s incredible economic success, he wrote, would be its cultural undoing. “Most of Manhattan and many parts of Brooklyn are virtual walled communities, pleasure domes for the rich,” he continued. “Middle-class people can barely afford to live here anymore, so forget about emerging artists, musicians, actors, dancers, writers, journalists and small business people. Bit by bit, the resources that keep the city vibrant are being eliminated.”

Artists in Los Angeles, I’m sure, can sympathize. Renters in L.A. shell out nearly half of their income for rent, the highest share in the country, according to a [UCLA study](#). The dark side of deepening inequality, worsening segregation and increasingly unaffordable housing that has gone along with the revivals of New York, Los Angeles and other major cities is personal and palpable for artists and other creative types. Decades ago, they were the only people who had the vision and courage to move into old, neglected industrial areas and transform

their abandoned lofts into studios and living spaces. Today, they are being elbowed out of those same neighborhoods by investment bankers, techies and even the global super-rich.

But allow me to throw cold water on the idea that our great cities are on the brink of becoming creative deserts, void of vibrancy and artistic life.

Despite soaring costs, L.A. and New York still account for the lion's share of America's artistic and creative industries. L.A.'s concentration of fine artists, painters and sculptors is nearly four times as high as the national average; New York's is 1 1/2 times as high. L.A. boasts more than twice and New York nearly three times the average for musicians and singers. Both metro areas have more than three times the average concentration of writers and authors. And L.A.'s concentration of fashion designers is nearly eight times higher than the national average, while New York's is 10 times higher.

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Rather than seeing their creativity deadened and driven out, cities like L.A. and New York are leaving the rest of the urban pack behind. The data tell us that, anecdotes aside, L.A. and New York are at least as artistically creative as ever.

Ultimately, it is not artists, musicians and urban creatives who are hardest hit by this new urban crisis, but working people in low-pay service industries as well as the poor. This becomes abundantly clear when we look at the amount of money that artists and cultural creatives, on average, have left over after paying for housing for one year. In L.A., those people have \$53,760 left. That's less than techies (\$64,350) and business professionals (\$75,870), but three and a half times more than members of the service class (\$15,350). The pattern is similar in New York, San Francisco and elsewhere.

Still, the picture is not entirely rosy. There has been a certain amount of sorting and shuffling between leading superstar cities. In 2014, electronic musician [Moby said](#) he left New York for Los Angeles “because creativity requires the freedom to fail,” and L.A.'s cheaper rents made that prospect less daunting. His anecdotal perception is backed up by empirical data. Artistic and cultural creatives *are* moving from New York to L.A. in numbers that are not trivial, according to a [detailed study](#) from the US Census Bureau.

There's also no denying that our great cities have become more expensive to live, and that younger, struggling artists and musicians have been priced out of many neighborhoods. That's because, on the whole, these cities' economies are much stronger than in the 1970s and '80s.

This crisis of economic success eventually may catch up with the creative class in these places. Creative urban ecosystems exist in a precarious balance, and the loss of arts districts exacts a cultural and economic toll. Take

away the ferment that comes from urban mixing, and the result is a sterile sameness. A one-bedroom apartment in downtown L.A. averages \$2,124 a month, according to Craig's List. It's no surprise, then, that in parts of downtown, luxury stores outnumber performance spaces and studios.

But keep in mind that cities are big places, and creativity can and does move from neighborhood to neighborhood. Even if it's harder for the next generation of creatives to get a toehold in premier urban districts like SoHo or Tribeca, West Hollywood, Venice Beach or the Mission, that doesn't mean that all of New York, L.A. and San Francisco are off-limits.

In time, the ongoing transformation of these cities may truly jeopardize their creative impetus. So far, though, that hasn't happened.

Richard Florida is a professor at the University of Toronto, a visiting distinguished fellow at New York University and editor-at-large with the Atlantic's CityLab. This essay is adapted from his new book, "The New Urban Crisis."

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