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# 'The New Urban Crisis': Richard Florida updates his influential thesis

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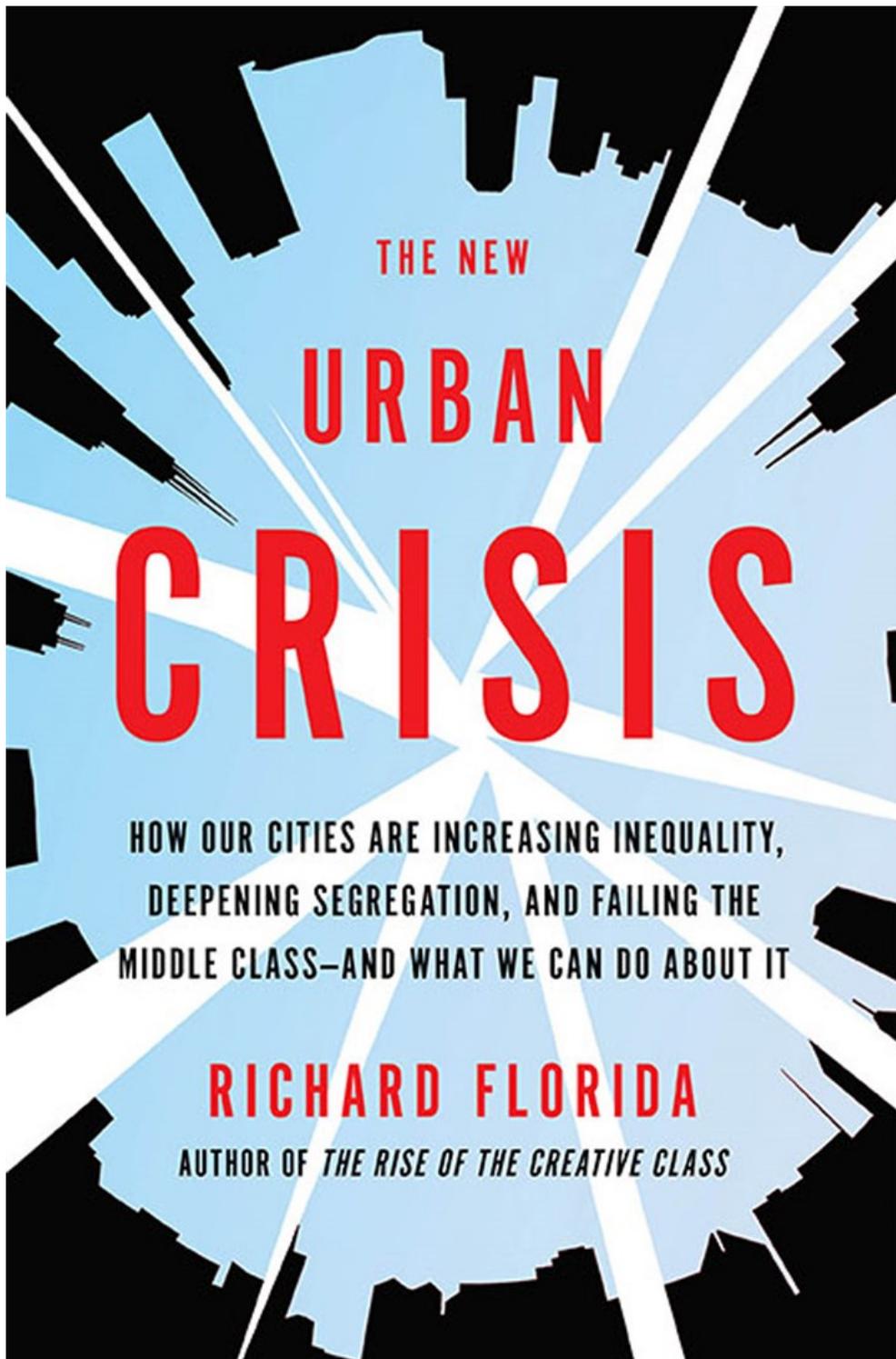
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"The New Urban Crisis," by Richard Florida



By Christopher Briem

Richard Florida has extended his series that began with publication of “The Rise of the Creative Class” in 2002. Pittsburgh is far from unfamiliar with the author. Some may be shocked to realize it has been 12 years since the former Carnegie Mellon University professor departed. He is currently based at the University of Toronto. He has repeatedly referenced his home for two decades, and Pittsburgh continues to impact Mr. Florida’s views on all things city.

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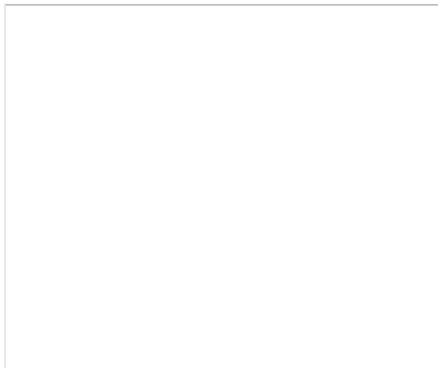
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In “The New Urban Crisis: How Our Cities Are Increasing Inequality, Deepening Segregation and Failing the Middle Class — And What We Can Do About It” (Basic Books, \$28), Mr. Florida is introspective about his Creative Class thesis, realizing it did not address a panoply of emerging challenges facing urban America.

Instead of generating prosperity for all, the influence of creative class workers has been limited by their self-segregation as they choose to cluster not only in “superstar cities” but also within “elite neighborhoods” that are colonies of the affluent and the educated. Not going back on his core argument that these workers are society’s engines of growth, he says their increasing isolation is leading to a less egalitarian end-state.

**"THE NEW URBAN CRISIS:  
HOW OUR CITIES ARE  
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By Richard Florida  
Basic Books (\$28).

Some will take umbrage with a title promising to expound on a new urban crisis. Urban America has long been in crisis, a point Mr. Florida acknowledges in passing. A 1980 presidential commission focusing on America’s already extant urban crisis suggested that cities were an anachronism, outdated in an era when so many who could were voting with their feet and choosing suburban homes.

When jobs also pushed away from the nation’s urban cores, the rise of suburban “Edge Cities” was just another waypoint as cities faced their obsolescence. Urban optimists, a group Mr. Florida now admits once included himself, believed that the expanding influence of creative urban-friendly workers was powering a reprieve for cities, if not an outright renaissance. Just considering Detroit’s recent bankruptcy, if there has been a renaissance of late for cities and their denizens, it has not been a renaissance felt by all.

It is that dichotomy of winners and losers — or as Mr. Florida now describes a Winner-Take-All Urbanism — that prompts the latest iteration of the Creative Class series. By now, the original work, much of it gestated here in Pittsburgh, must count as one of the most referenced social science books in the modern era. Few are ambivalent on Mr. Florida’s basic tenets, and legions are either devout believers or dour opponents. Acknowledging the complexity of the ongoing challenges facing cities, this book may be a step toward bringing together those two camps.

Whether aficionado or critic, all who have been impacted by debates over the Creative Class will want to learn more about the evolution of Mr. Florida’s thinking. He deserves credit for critically revisiting his widely absorbed past work, clearly acknowledging that much of his earlier ideas may have been “overly optimistic,” at least if viewed as policy prescriptions to be easily followed. As many have discovered before him, the deepest challenges do not lend themselves to simple solutions.

As with “Rise of the Creative Class” itself, Mr. Florida liberally interposes personal and professional observations, references to a vast literature on similar topics with blasts of tabular data, graphs and maps. In this, his previous Bohemian Index has been displaced by a new Urban Crisis Index, which likewise may suffer from a certain over-quantification. While this reviewer rarely finds a datapoint he does not find informative, Mr. Florida’s amalgam is often discordant. Each graph or figure feels squeezed into the expansive narrative and deserves more exposition to dissect.

Readers will gain by using “The New Urban Crisis” as a gateway, or accompaniment, to a vast literature on how our nation is dividing, as reflected in our urban centers, for sure, and beyond. The path toward our great separation has been well documented by Bill Bishop’s “The Big Sort”; Eric Moretti’s “The New Geography of Jobs” focuses on our changing workforce, and Robert Sampson’s “Great American City” details the pervasiveness of urban poverty in America. But those are just the beginning. Those works and more are integrated into Mr. Florida’s narrative, but each deserves a full read.

Mr. Florida continues to address the most vexing problems we face as a society: politics and poverty, sociology and segregation, innovation and growth, zoning, education, workforce training, gentrification, zoning, taxes and regulation, just to begin. But he has few peers as a communicator.

Without doubt, he has inspired a legion of new urbanists, not only in the United States, but also around the world. His latest volume makes clear they signed on to a far more intransigent challenge.

Christopher Briem is a researcher in the Urban and Regional Analysis program at the University Center for Social and Urban Research, University of Pittsburgh.

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