

The Place Master

Observations by Andrew M Manshel about what makes great Downtowns and Public Spaces. The website of PLACE MASTER PROJECTS providing practical advisory services for the implementation of downtown revitalization and the operation of public spaces.

The Triumph of The Creative Class



"On The Staten Island Ferry Looking Toward Manhattan (L'Embarquement Pour Cythere)" Richard Estes – Louis K. Meisel Gallery

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](#)

Perhaps no writer has had a greater impact on the thinking and practice of downtown revitalization than Richard Florida. With "The Rise of the Creative Class" in 2002, Florida created a paradigm shift in how we talk about the changing nature of the urban core. At the time, a professor in Pittsburgh, Florida identified a movement of young artists and knowledge workers back to center cities and noted that those cities that were attracting creative people were experiencing an increased uptick in economic activity. As a result, there was a rush by cities of all sizes across the country to adopt strategies to attract highly educated young professionals to their downtowns – like the adaptive reuse of abandoned formerly industrial buildings as working and living spaces. Florida's ideas became the common currency of real estate developers and mayors.

Now writing from his post at the University of Toronto, Florida's new book argues that the rebirth of cities around the country and across the world has actually created a crisis of affordability and inequality. Cities have become theme parks for the rich and have failed to create upward mobility for the poor. Florida has a sophisticated view of "gentrification." He looks at the data and does not see much displacement of lower-income families actually happening, but he reviews mountains of data and describes what he calls "winner-take-all" urbanism which benefits an elite group of the highly educated and makes life increasingly difficult for the less well off who face long commutes, a lack of essential services and a lower quality of life. Outside of the North America and Europe, Florida sees a massive movement of the poor to cities without even basic infrastructure. He describes the construction of massive favelas made up of poorly constructed, minimal housing where residents live in grinding poverty.

Florida's book is not only descriptive, though. It is also prescriptive with recommendations for sweeping changes to urban policy. First, he goes back to 19th century economist, Henry George, and suggests that a land tax would create a powerful incentive to insure that property is put to its highest and best use – in order to create increased efficiency through density. He calls for infrastructure investment in transit and high-speed rail (and who doesn't!). Florida argues for increased levels of subsidy for affordable multi-family rental housing – to make center cities home to a broader band of family incomes. Then he talks about creating a regulatory structure that raises the incomes of service workers to a level that enables middle-class stability – essentially through raising minimum wages and a negative income tax. On the international level, he calls for a shifting aid from "nation-building" to city building – assisting underdeveloped countries by underwriting urban infrastructure like transit and density. Finally, Florida recommends that U.S. Federal policy be recalibrated to devolve power down to localities to improve policy outcomes.

My reaction to this is to ask, "Why does there has to be a 'crisis'?" In the 60's and 70's we had the "crisis" of urban disinvestment. That led to the "crisis" of the hollowing out of cities, perceptions of a lack of public safety, and racial friction. Aren't conditions in cities across the country now much, much better for everyone who lives there – rich and poor, white and people of color? Why aren't we celebrating that rather than trying to identify a new "crisis?" I lived through the New York of the 70's and actually don't remember it as being all that bad. Yes, the city was dirtier. The homicide rate was higher. The subways were hot and covered with graffiti. I was held up at gunpoint in 1981 on Sixth Avenue and 24th Street. When I moved into our current apartment in 1989 and set out to fix up the tree pits outside our building I had to wear heavy gloves to clean out the crack vials and syringes. But I have to say I enjoyed living here in the 70's and 80's. Standing room at the Met Opera was \$5. The world of contemporary music and dance was way more interesting than it is now. Even on my limited student income, we were occasionally able to afford to splurge on some of the city's fanciest restaurants. My half the rent was \$180 in 1980.

But also, what Dr. King pointed out HAS proven to be true – the arc of history HAS bent towards justice. Government programs aimed at improving conditions among the least well off Americans have improved their conditions. The definition of "poverty" has been something of a moving target – and Florida uses standard statistical measures as the basis of his arguments. But would anyone really want to suggest that the least advantaged in the U.S. today find themselves in inferior material conditions to those in the 1960's, when millions of American citizens, both rural and urban, lived in substandard housing without access to sufficient calories, indoor plumbing, electricity, phone service or basic modern health care services? There is no doubt that in recent years in-

equality of income has grown to a level that is simply unconscionable (and likely has led to considerable social instability), but the bottom has certainly risen.

We are similarly reticent to take credit for the vast improvement in social and institutional advancement of people of color in our society. There is no more diverse place on earth. Again, there is no doubt that racial disparities continue to plague us and there are too many Americans who maintain hateful racial identities. But we HAVE had a black president (and scores of other elected officials from communities of color). There IS a black president of the Ford Foundation – both unimaginable twenty years ago. There are scores of black millionaires (even hedge funders) and tens of millions of black folks have moved into the middle class. The nonviolence and moral leadership of the civil rights movement DID accomplish a great deal.

I would argue that the failure to recognize this significant social progress has contributed to the backlash that we are now experiencing. At best, I would suggest that there may be Americans who feel if that we have invested all this energy and these resources over the past fifty years towards attempting to improve the economic status of the least well off and advance the interests of the historically disadvantaged without actually accomplishing anything, why bother to continue trying? There might, actually, be considerable political benefit to recognize the advancements we have made, in order to continue to move forward – what Jim Collins called “the fly-wheel effect.” (It is also worth pointing out that the data also show that, internationally, the dietary and economic conditions of hundreds of millions of people have dramatically improved over the last fifty years to a degree historically without precedent).

The count-narrative above to the one proposed by Florida isn't to argue that all is well and that we don't continue to face serious social and economic problems – particularly when it comes to economic inequality. It is to say, though, that Florida and other policy professionals should take a bow and a little credit for the good they've done!

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