

BOOK REVIEW | NONFICTION

# Why America's Great Cities Are Becoming More Economically Segregated

By NICOLE GELINAS JUNE 26, 2017

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

Illustrated. 310 pp. Basic Books. \$28.

Richard Florida became famous among people who think about cities 15 years ago with “The Rise of the Creative Class.” He predicted that postindustrial cities would succeed by focusing on the three Ts: technology, talent and tolerance. People in the “creative class” benefit from density, he said, and would move to places where laws are kind to tech entrepreneurs, where museums provide an evening out and where gay people are comfortable. Indeed, New York recovered its private-sector jobs nearly four years faster than the nation after the Great Recession.

In “The New Urban Crisis,” Florida focuses on what the creative class’s emergence, and the decline of the middle class, have done to cities. Florida uses the category “creative class” to distinguish the one-third of the American work force who employ their brains rather than their bodies. The second group he puts into two

further categories, the working class — that is, people who do physical labor — and the service class, describing waiters, retail workers and the like.

“Creative class” is not an accurate term, but it is sexy. What Florida means is the top third of American earners, which would include a financial adviser who encourages his clients to invest in a varied portfolio and stay there — vital, but not creative. It would not include a firefighter who has to think fast about what to say to a drunken, suicidal man to keep him from jumping off a building. The term includes pop superstars who remember the old East Village, and the guitar player who can’t afford to live near there. It is obviously judgmental, encompassing life as well as work, so it tells a supermarket clerk that he must be a dolt.

The news for cities since this upper-middle class emerged is not good, Florida says. Some cities, like New York and San Francisco, are doing so well that everyone wants to be there. He writes that “by moving back to the urban core, affluent whites are able to simultaneously reduce their commutes, locate near high-paying economic opportunities and gain privileged access to the better amenities that come from urban living” like parks and restaurants. Gentrification of poorer and middle-class neighborhoods on the part of middle-class black people is a similar phenomenon.

But some cities, including Detroit, suffer because too few people want to live there, even as a small creative class revitalizes their downtowns. Poor neighborhoods have remained poor. Segregation by income is growing worse, with fewer middle-class neighborhoods and more rich and poor neighborhoods. The child of a factory worker no longer goes to school with the company manager’s child.

Florida is not arguing that these problems are specifically urban. “The suburban dimension of the New Urban Crisis may well turn out to be bigger than the urban one,” he writes. As “the new urban elite” moves to some cities, displaced residents are moving to suburbs. Other struggling people are seeing towns where they have long lived decline. Between 2000 and 2013, poverty grew by 29 percent in cities, but by 66 percent in suburbs. More poor people now live in suburbs than in the inner cities, and poverty is bringing social ills. Murders rose by 17 percent in the suburbs between 2001 and 2010, while falling by the same amount in cities. Poorer suburbanites, isolated from jobs, have fewer options than poorer people in cities.

Ferguson, Mo., can't offer the social services and competent policing that New York provides.

Yet Florida doesn't square some inconsistencies. He writes that inequality tends to slow growth, while acknowledging that New York and San Francisco are growing quite well. He says that inequality and economic segregation are "deadly" because they reinforce advantages and disadvantages, but says of New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Boston that "even though they are highly segregated and unequal," they offer "greater avenues for upward mobility" for the poor. The contradiction makes the reader wonder why he puts Los Angeles and New York toward the top of his urban-crisis list.

"The New Urban Crisis" would have benefited from a chapter examining one city, to demonstrate that numbers aren't everything. Florida presents some figures, for example, that show foreign billionaires aren't the main cause of housing-price increases. But the New Yorkers who live near Billionaires' Row on 57th Street aren't angry about housing prices. They are angry because, thanks to bad zoning, new out-of-scale towers cast shadows on Central Park. Similarly, many people who oppose new development on their blocks aren't "new urban Luddites," as Florida calls them; they are worried that illegal construction practices bring pollution and noise to their streets.

Likewise, Florida states blithely that "Uber and Airbnb hope to actually make some aspects of cities work more efficiently." Sure, and BP hopes to end climate change. In the meantime, Uber heavily subsidizes the price of a black-car ride, although streets in dense cities can't handle more cars. Airbnb has allowed people to illegally convert entire apartment buildings into hotels, further constricting housing supply. What's more, Airbnb property owners pay their cleaners informally, something that big-city hotels can't do, and a practice that undercuts one Florida goal: creating higher-paying jobs for service employees.

Several of Florida's solutions are sound — although they, too, would benefit from a closer look at individual cities. He suggests more mass transit, including bringing rail to suburbs that have reached the limits of moving people efficiently by

car. He suggests more rental housing construction, a good idea for New York, but not so much for shrunken cities that have too much housing.

Florida also wants a cabinet-level Department of Cities. Donald Trump might agree with him: The president talks often of the “inner city.” But Trump means soaring murders on Chicago’s South Side, not the Midtown Manhattan neighborhood where Trump Tower is located. Which city would the new department serve? Both have troubles — but different ones.

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