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Leonard Quart: Letter From New York|:Maintaining equality while reviving cities

Letter From New York

Posted Thursday, August 31, 2017 4:45 pm

By Leonard Quart

NEW YORK — In his 2002 book "The Rise of the Creative Class," Richard Florida argued that in order to save themselves from post-industrial ruin, cities needed to attract the best young talent in computer programming, finance, media and the arts. Some cities followed his prescription and made themselves more vibrant by creating more walkable, pedestrian-friendly streets, caf and restaurant areas that acted as lively gathering places, refurbished parks, and art and music scenes. Those cities became magnets for what Florida called the "creative class," but the consequences as Florida soon discovered were complex and not all of them worth cheering.

He found that "the metros with the highest levels of wage inequality were also those with the most dynamic and successful creative economies — San Francisco, Boston, Seattle, and New York." For in those cities, to which the mostly white, young and wealthy "creative class" had migrated in such great numbers, they began to push out large populations of mostly blue-collar and often poor or minority residents from their neighborhoods.

Gentrification sprawl

For example, it's clear in New York that once stable white blue-collar neighborhoods like Windsor Terrace, Astoria, and Greenpoint, and black and Hispanic neighborhoods that contain handsome housing stock like Bedford-Stuyvesant and Hamilton Heights (West Harlem), have become increasingly unaffordable with housing prices skyrocketing as the upper middle class moves in. Even the poverty-ridden South Bronx has seen the beginnings of gentrification that could in the long run begin to make it unaffordable for its low-income residents to live there. The average rents in Mott Haven/Hunts Point rose by 28 percent between 1990 and 2010-2014, and the share of adults with college degrees also rose in Mott Haven/Hunts Point between 2000 and 2010-2014, from 4.8 percent to 9.2 percent.

Despite all these cities' glistening surfaces and conspicuous wealth, problems abound. Florida saw them suffering, in his words, a "crisis of success." As a result, in his new book, "The New Urban Crisis" (Basic Books), he has responded to his critics by trying to find a balance between the pessimists who see inequality as a "direct outgrowth of the re-colonization of the city by the affluent and the advantaged," and the optimists who celebrate cities "as models of economic and social progress."

Florida also sees the crisis in American cities as affecting sprawling Sunbelt (unsustainable economies) and declining Rust Belt cities and suburbs as well. The crisis is characterized by economic and racial segregation, spatial inequality, and entrenched poverty. But the book places more emphasis on the superstar cities where in San Francisco — possibly the most gentrified city in the country — the average income of the top 1 percent of households in the city averages \$3.6 million, 44 times the average income of the bottom 99 percent.

So, the superstar cities may have innovative and productive economies, but the gains go to their most privileged residents while the working and service class fall further behind. Florida analyzes in complex detail the growth of inequality in these cities without indulging in sweeping rhetorical attacks. For example, he is aware that artists and musicians have been priced out of some neighborhoods (e.g. SoHo in NYC), but believes these cities "are at least as artistically creative as they ever were, and even more technologically innovative."

Writing about gentrification, which he views as a painful problem in affluent superstar cities, he finds that what creates many more difficulties are the large number of neighborhoods mired in poverty that gentrification never touches. He sees gentrification as boosted by public investment like new transit lines, parks like the High Line in Chelsea, and large scale publicly subsidized redevelopment efforts like the Hudson Yards in New York.

Florida is antipathetic to reflexive attacks on gentrifiers (a point of view that I share), seeing the opposition to investment in neighborhoods and cities as counter-productive. Neighborhoods always both profit and lose something in the gentrifying process.

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For example, Columbia's imposing new campus that encompasses a squalid, former industrial area from West 125th to 133rd St. has displaced some residents and businesses, and invoked protests. However, Columbia has also tried to help the neighborhood by spending \$177 million on construction contracts for women and

minority-owned businesses in Harlem, and providing \$76 million in installments, over a 16-year period, to a community benefits fund.

Florida always opts for a balanced view when dealing with these questions. However, while his overview is commonsensical and he recognizes that residents feel anguish when their neighborhoods lose their character and affordability, there is something a touch cavalier in his dealing with these problems.

Federal help needed, unlikely

Still, Florida has carefully rethought the premise of his 2002 book, and sees that "if we do nothing, today's urban crisis will only worsen and deepen." He stresses that rental unaffordability, segregation, weak infrastructure (lack of high speed train service), and inequality are in fact national problems. So his policy prescriptions includes directing federal housing subsidies to low income renters, turning low paid service work into middle class jobs and improving conditions in poverty neighborhoods by public investment in schools and social services.

Florida's commitments are the right ones, but in the Trump era, and even before his nightmarish ascent, the chances of the federal government intervening to bring about affordable housing and improved transit and addressing the causes of poverty are mainly just a dream.

Florida is not blind to that fact, but he finds a saving grace in the growth of urbanism. For in the long run (and it may take a decade or more), he sees economic progress developing from a "better, more inclusive urbanism."

Leonard.Quart can be reached at cinwrit@aol.com

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