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Business, civic and cultural minds unite to bring “inclusive prosperity” to Orange County

The Montage Laguna provided an apt backdrop for the day-long symposium, Diversity and the Creative Economy. The goal was razor focused: To discuss how inclusion and creativity can foster economic mobility and prosperity in Orange County, its stunning coastal landscape prominently displayed via 180-degree views from the luxury hotel.

Attendees came from a broad cross section of cultural, civic, legislative and business perspectives, to discuss how openness to gender, race, nationality, sexual orientation has gone from private virtue to economic necessity. Sponsors included The Laguna Beach LGBTQ Heritage & Culture Alliance and real estate investment firm Laguna Beach Company, Compass, Bank of America and other local businesses.

Keynote speaker Richard Florida, a researcher, prolific writer and professor at University of Toronto, and senior editor for The Atlantic, says that an influx of the creative classes—tech workers, artists, musicians, lesbians, gay men, hipsters, and bohemians—sparked economic growth in places like Austin, Boulder and the Bay Area.
Top right: Richard Florida on stage at Laguna Beach symposium.

Performance by students from Orange County School of the Arts.
Their tolerance, flexibility and eccentricity dissolved the rigid structures of industrial production, he argues, to be replaced with workplaces and neighborhoods that attracted more young people and, importantly, more investment.

“My research has long suggested that tolerance and openness are key drivers of economic growth,” Florida said at the Montage. “I’m thrilled to join the LGBTQ Alliance in Laguna Beach and talk about the region’s future for inclusive prosperity.”

The evolution toward acceptance, inclusion and creativity, and the economic benefits derived as a result, are to be valued. Still, the shift he predicted and promoted has not all been positive, Florida admits. Fifteen years later, the success of tech enclaves like the Silicon Valley has also resulted in inequality and income gaps.

At the Laguna Beach symposium, Florida discussed inclusion as an economic strength, while also making an argument for more affordable housing, more investment in infrastructure, and higher pay for service jobs.

Richard Florida | Creative Class
Groupcreativeclass.com

Blue Door Magazine’s Kedric Francis sat down with Richard Florida to talk about inclusion, creativity and everyone’s favorite topic: the California housing crisis.

Kedric Francis: In your remarks you spoke about growing inequality, including in creative economies and inclusive communities. In California, we’re in a housing crisis with a need for some 3.5 million new units. What would you suggest to convince the growth-averse that diverse and increasingly dense new neighborhoods are good for us?

Richard Florida: I think there are two things. If you want your kids to live where they grew up, you better make it affordable, because if not, your kids are going to have to go somewhere else, that’s number one. Number two, I think there’s polarization between the social justice warriors and the elites. I think there’s no way around that. I think the state leaders are right that we have to build more, but just building more won’t create affordable housing. I think we have to commit to both building more, and building affordable housing, and strengthening communities, and being very vigilant with regard to people being displaced.
KF Many agree in principal with the need for more mixed use walkable neighborhoods with market rate and affordable housing—until a project is suggested in their neighborhood. Then its death by a thousand cuts, from design review to CEQA suits.

RF Yes, and what makes it difficult is the place we need to build the most is in the inner ring suburbs. That doesn’t mean building tall towers on every corner, it means intensifying land use, building up density, creating a streetscape. Places like downtown Los Angeles and San Diego are getting a lot built. Always remember that the L.A. metropolitan area is the densest metropolitan area in the country. It doesn’t look like it. You can create density and still have open space.

KF Former L.A. Times architecture critic Christopher Hawthorne has one of my favorite quotes about NIMBYism: “I don’t have a problem with somebody who bought a house at a certain point saying, ‘I bought into a certain place, I want it to stay this way, and I’m going to use whatever resources I can to keep it that way.’ They have every right to say that, even if I disagree. I have a problem with people saying that’s consistent with a progressive agenda about cities or a forward-looking attitude about the environment or about resources. It’s not.”

RF Yes, but I think there’s blame on all sides. Developers can work with city planners and commit to including affordable housing in their project, and actually building it rather than paying mitigation fees.

When you want to encourage people to be less NIMBYous—NIMBYistic? — let’s let neighborhood residents share in the spoils of new development: create a property tax incentive. If you agree to allow and encourage more development and density in your neighborhood, your property taxes would go down.

KF So appeal to enlightened self-interest—carrot rather than stick?

RF You can argue ethics and civic good, or you can say, “Look, you have an economic incentive to let development occur. It would reduce your property tax burden.”

KF A key, I think is to plan new housing and intensified use where there’s already a walkable infrastructure. A place creative and inclusive people want to live.

RF No doubt. I asked my students at University of Toronto who are in the Rotman School of Management and are going to have the best jobs in all of Canada. Most of them now are saying they want to live in a condominium. They want a home between 1,500 and 2,500 square feet, depending on family size. They want to be in a central location where they have more time for their family, not drive miles to work, and they don’t want a big house to take care of. People want a different kind of living.

KF Yes, the “live, work, play” concept of mixed use neighborhoods. And adding housing and density where the creative jobs exist and more are coming, for example, and near transit will help protect traditional neighborhoods. Laguna, and every city in OC, will likely be asked/told to approve more housing. The answer isn’t, “Well, let’s just build stuff everywhere,” and then you have it in a place that’s not walkable at all. Where there are few stores, restaurants, or parks, so we’re still driving everywhere.

RF Many people prefer living in a neighborhood where you can walk to the park. One of the great things about parks is you tend to see people who are different. In the public spaces, of course you’re going to interact with people different from you. In a suburb where you have your own backyard, you’re never going to do that.

KF Well, you can in this city. Much of Laguna Beach is actually very walkable. The city has a wonderful trolley, too. And yet its downtown district is less vibrant and attractive than it could be, in my opinion.

RF How much new housing is there downtown?

KF There’s a live/work artist project finally underway in Laguna Canyon, but it’s taken years and years to get approved. There’s a new Specific Plan in the works, though. It would allow some new housing downtown, second stories on existing buildings, and the like.

RF Yes, we toured downtown and I see the need.

KF Well, thank you for your time today. If anyone can continue to build a more inclusive, diverse and creative economy in Orange County, it’s the group gathered here today.