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The world is not flat

By ANDREW WELSH-HUGGINS, Associated Press Writer

"Who's Your City?" (Basic Books. 374 pages. \$26.95), by Richard Florida: Everyone has heard the theory by now: Thanks to the Internet and other high-tech elements of globalization, the world is flat.

That is, economic forces are increasingly spread across a world without boundaries, helped by everything from faster transportation to the World Wide Web, allowing companies and countries to level the capitalistic playing field.

The result? Entrepreneurs in India, to take just one example, are positioned to compete with businesses in the United States as well as if they were physically located here. It's an argument made popular by New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman in his best-selling book, "The World Is Flat."

Hold on, says author and professor Richard Florida, best known for his development of theories about the economic engine of what he dubs the creative class of urban intellectuals.

The world is not flat, he argues. Rather, it's spiky — spiky as in a few megaregions that dominate the world economy because they draw people whose physical presence contributes to the development of new ideas and goods.

"Today's key economic factors — talent, innovation and creativity — are not distributed evenly across the global economy. They concentrate in specific locations," Florida writes. It's a phenomenon he calls the clustering force.

"New ideas are generated and our productivity increases when we locate close to one another in cities and regions," he says.

The reality, Florida says, is there are two sides of globalization. On the one hand is the "flat world" spreading of some economic functions around the planet, such as telephone call centers and basic manufacturing. On the other, is the tendency for higher-level economic activities, such as innovation, design and media, to cluster in relatively small numbers of locations.

"The key to our new global reality lies in understanding that the world is flat and spiky at the same time," Florida writes.

As a result, he proposes that where people choose to live is at least as important as what they choose to do or who they choose as a life partner.

Florida uses reams of data to show that the world's economy revolves around a relatively few megaregions: greater Tokyo (\$2.5 trillion in economic output); the Boston-to-New York-Washington corridor (\$2.2 trillion); and the greater London region (\$1.2 trillion), among others.

Florida includes several thought provoking charts, including some developed by other researchers — maps that measure the clustering of people by emissions of light, numbers of patents won and homes of scientists in leading fields.

Florida is fond of categories. He divides people trying to improve themselves economically into two classes: the mobile and the rooted.

He refers to the rise of two labor groups: "geeks" — those enjoying higher-paying, higher-skill work; and "grunts," or laborers in the service sector with fewer skills and lower pay.

He dubs urban neighborhoods full of families raising children "strollervilles." "Family land" is the classic suburb of big house and big lawn; "boho-burbs" are older suburbs with the cultural amenities of cities but also their problems, including crime.

Regions that rank high in categories such as neuroticism, conscientiousness and agreeableness (top contenders: Chicago, Minneapolis and Cleveland) are "outgoing regions."

Those areas big on agreeableness and conscientiousness — Atlanta, Phoenix and Charlotte, N.C. — are "conventional" or "dutiful" regions.

All this number- and people-crunching can take a toll on the reader at times, and Florida runs the risk of seeing his basic thesis — spiky, not flat — drowned in a sea of statistics.

Though Florida writes with almost boundless optimism about the advantages of clustering, he also touches on the darker side of his theory of globalization, which may be the most important thing to draw from "Who's Your City?"

"The world economy of the future is likely to take shape around an even smaller number of mega-regions and specialized centers," he writes, "while a much larger number of places will see their fates worsen as they find themselves struggling just to stay in the game."