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Q&A: 'Creative Class' author on Austin — blog

Austin Business Journal - by Sandra Zaragoza

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[Leadership Austin](#), a nonprofit offering leadership training programs for the community, last week invited bestselling author **Richard Florida** — who wrote “The Flight of the Creative Class” — to the [University of Texas](#) to discuss his newest book “The Great Reset.”

In the novel, Florida looks to future and identifies patterns and forces that he believes will spur “new ways of living and working” and “drive post-crash prosperity.”

Florida took some time, after his remarks, to give his thoughts on Austin, which he sees as one of the top creative centers in the country.

It's been a while — maybe five years — since you've been to Austin. What are your thoughts on how it's changed?

I came here when Austin was just beginning the strategy to become a tech center What's struck me now is how grown up Austin is. ... Austin has become a place where really innovative companies come to get access to a phenomenal talent stream. It's certainly more affordable, more outdoorsy and less congested. I think one of the challenges moving forward is how to maintain Austin's character, how to make sure its lifestyle is protected.

The other thing that struck me was the remaking of downtown. ... It's much more of a live-work-play lifestyle. Obviously, the kind of center of it all is this university [UT]. It really shows the power of a college town centered by a great research university, with some level of urbanity.

You mentioned, during your remarks, that a college town will come out of the recession in a special way. Can you explain?

So I think the college towns — because of health care education, because people with skills can more easily find new avenues of employment, because they have more levels of education — are more flexible. They've come out of it looking like the best places in America to be.

The challenges to Austin are not so much domestic, they are global. So in the old technology world, it was Silicon Valley, or Austin or Seattle, but now the rise of India, China, off-shore centers make the competition even harder. ... Does Austin want to be a place that's good, with a relatively good standard of living and a relatively good quality of life or does it want to be really, really great and define the frontier? If I know Austin, it seems to always want to be great.

Is there anything holding Austin back?

I think Austin is in as good a shape as any metropolitan area. ... I think the great challenge to Austin is in the external environment of the state of Texas and the United States. If we can't get past this partisan gridlock, I think that's a big deal. The other challenge is that if Austin gets to be perceived by local residents as a community of haves and have-nots. ... For Austin's sake, we got to make Austin more inclusive. If it just has a thriving music scene, and a thriving tech sector and a thriving cultural scene and protection of the environment that's great, but people are going to get mad if they are not included. ... Austin needs to understand that, in order to grow again, it needs to have much more social cohesion.

What is the role of small business and entrepreneurs in “The Great Recession?”

One of the things I tell my students in MBA school is that it's not your job when you graduate to get a job, it's your job when you graduate to create a job. That's what every one of us needs to know during times of turbulence. We have to constantly be creating our jobs. ... The other place I think we can look for entrepreneurship in Austin is in the music community. When I look at youthful entrepreneurship, I see it in kids forming bands and having to go out and get a gig, marketing their band and booking studio time. ... Creating ways to mentor and develop those skills there is really important.

What are some examples of Austin companies that have really captured your attention?

When I look at companies that really interest me in transforming the service business, [Whole Foods](#) because I hated to go the grocery store, it was just demoralizing and depressing. The grocery store treated me like crap and its employees worse. One of the things that Whole Foods did was not only treat me the customer good and give me a good customer experience, it treated the employees good. After I wrote "Creative Class" I got this note that said I misunderstood everything about Austin, "The reason Austin is creative is that we have good employers like Whole Foods that allow people in music and film to make a living wage, so they can work at night." This clued me in, having a good service sector means having a good creative sector. ... I think that is where we have to get as a country. Paying people better, tapping their knowledge, not destroying the environment. Sustainable, inclusive and creative are the new economic competitiveness equation.

What kind of leaders do we need right now?

People really believe that having a leadership of integrity, that's transparent, that's open, that's legitimate is a critical part of feeling engaged in the community. One, Austin has that. It's a classically good government kind of town: highly educated, city manager, all of this. But the other thing people want is they need to feel engaged in their community and want to be part of the leadership, which is why I think Leadership Austin is so important. It means it's something you can do. ... I think making sure all segments of society, young people, new immigrant communities, lower income people feel part of that equation is really important. And that becomes a source of tremendous energy in a community.



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