



Capitalist Crisis and Who Built America?

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by Ellen Noonan

An article by the urbanist Richard Florida in the current [Atlantic](#) provided me with a welcome “aha” moment on the subway this morning, piercing the intellectually deadening fog of federal grant writing that has descended on me this week. Florida evaluates the current financial crisis in the context of previous convulsive shifts in the development of capitalism in the U.S., starting with the late 19th century—the original Great Depression, as Josh reminded us at our staff meeting on Tuesday.

In addition to generating some sound policy proposals, Florida’s insights rest on a concept that seems useful for thinking about the next edition of the *Who Built America?* textbook. He argues that different phases in capitalist development engender and are enabled by specific geographies: the late 19th century shift from agriculture to manufacturing multiplied the rise of dense urban areas; the shift to a consumer economy that began during the 1930s led to (and was powered by) suburbanization. This connection of capitalism and space is not new, of course (think William Cronon’s *Nature’s Metropolis*, for example), but Florida’s concise presentation of it in the service of understanding financial crisis helped me to connect the dots back to *WBA*.

Most of *WBA*’s narrative about U.S. history is driven by economic (mostly capitalist) transformation and how it both shapes and is shaped by working people. But midway through the second volume, around the early 1950s, economic transformation cedes the wheel to politics and social movements, which drive the remaining chapters of the textbook (with a few interjections from economic transformation, now ensconced in the back seat). *WBA* starts to sound more like other textbooks at that point, and we’ve so far made that trade-off in order to maintain coverage of many key events. But Florida might offer a conceptual solution. Can drawing those connections between space and capitalist development help us restore economic transformation to a more central place in the second volume’s later chapters? And can it help us to integrate environmental history—currently quite scarce in both volumes—in a way that is organic rather than tacked on?

Have we missed the forest of postwar suburbs' capitalist function and implications for the trees of their racial and class formation?

WBA does a great job of presenting the lived political, social, and cultural responses of Americans undergoing the financial crises and transformations of the 19th and 20th centuries. Now we need to start collecting evidence for this latest catastrophe.