

City's creativity relies on affordability, author says

Richard Florida encourages urban centres to make space for young, economically challenged

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VANCOUVER - Vancouver is poised to become one of the creative cities of the world, but that success could be eroded if it can't find a way to provide affordable housing, says the current guru of urban planning.

"You are in the proverbial catbird seat," said Richard Florida, the hugely popular author of *The Rise of the Creative Class*, whose work has generated headlines around North America and even appearances on *The Colbert Report*.

For one, he says, Vancouver has developed a new kind of urbanism that combines a beautiful built environment with a beautiful natural environment.

"It is a very affluent city and it is a city that is a superstar city, very desirable not only locally but globally. It is on the world map.

"Maybe it's not London or Manhattan, but it's the next step," said Florida, in Vancouver for the first time to speak at the 2008 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences. "This is a model of urbanism that has to be protected, that has to be thought about, as a world model for the integration of the built and the natural environments."

On top of that, he said, Vancouver has several economic advantages. The main one is that it's on the northern edge of the Vancouver-San Francisco mega-region, which is a "technological frontier of the world."

Because it's in Canada, it is going to benefit from the current post-9/11 U.S. immigration restrictions, he said. Immigrants will come here and businesses, like Microsoft did, will come here to take advantage of that.

"Between a third to half of all the Silicon Valley businesses were founded by a foreign-born person not a U.S. citizen. But Vancouver has an incredible capacity to attract those people now."

The fly in the ointment is housing prices.

"One of the things I worry about from a city-planning perspective, whether we're talking about San Francisco or Vancouver or New York or London or Toronto, how is the city going to remain affordable? And I think this is particularly one with economically less-advantaged people but also for young people, for both groups."

If Vancouver has aspirations to be a high-tech city, that lack of affordability is going to hobble its ability to develop a cluster of businesses in that field, he said.

In an interview after his speech to an audience of about 300 at the congress, Florida said cities that haven't solved that problem are starting to see the consequences.

All the creative energy has been sucked out of Manhattan, he said.

In Toronto, the city he recently moved to, one of his graduate students has found through research that young musicians and artists are starting to move out of the central city because they can't afford it any longer.

Instead, they're finding that the suburbs they used to dismiss are places where they can live cheaply and find practice space.

Florida's first book put forward the idea that it's not just corporate decisions about where to locate businesses that make a city thrive. It's also about where people who work in the creative industries -- everything from high-tech to music to science research -- choose to live. They are increasingly choosing where to live, not just on the basis of family or work, but what kind of place makes them feel good.

That class, he has argued, feels good in cities that have a high "quality of place" and where the community is open to diversity. Cities that work to foster that will do better at attracting those creative people and, by extension, the businesses that employ them.

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