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VIEWPOINT

Who's your Calgary?

The dimensions of a city's personality
Published April 3, 2008 by [Ira Wells](#) in [Viewpoint](#)

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Who's your city? If your answer to this slightly bizarre question is "Calgary," then you may be interested to know that your city does not make an appearance in *Who's Your City?*, the new book by Richard Florida. It is an engaging, interesting work, but one that doesn't so much as tip its hat in the direction of Cowtown. How is it that Canada's pre-eminent urban theorist has nothing to say about Canada's pre-eminent boom town?

[Tomb](#)

There are a couple of equally plausible answers. The first comes from Florida himself, who informs us that a Canadian edition of the new book is due out this summer. The second, slightly less palatable suggestion (mine, not Florida's) is that Calgary doesn't exactly mesh with some of the author's most important rubrics for understanding regional growth. A quick review of some of Florida's key concepts makes this plain enough.

Rather than seeing culture as something that is determined by economics (or the other way around), Florida's work posits a dialectical relationship between the two terms. Conventional wisdom may have it that fripperies like art and entertainment are the offspring of affluence, but Florida urges us to think about the ways in which cultural production is intimately bound up in the creation of wealth. Throughout his career, Florida has traced these ideas through his notion of the "creative class," in which specific demographics, including bohemians and gays, cultivate open and dynamic cultural spaces that are conducive to (among other things) the production of wealth.

In *Who's Your City?*, Florida argues that bohemian and gay populations have a direct relation to housing values, higher incomes and regional economic success in general. As he puts it, "regions in which artists and gays have migrated and settled are more likely than others to place high premiums on innovation, entrepreneurship and new firm formation." In other words, it's no coincidence that the most tolerant and diverse cities (such as New York or San Francisco) have enjoyed long-term economic success: creative people tend to cluster in welcoming environments, where ideas, ingenuity and wealth then grow exponentially. Success in the creative economy is the result of interconnectivity and innovation, rather than, say, the manufacture of automobiles, or the production of oil.

Which is precisely why Calgarians should avoid sinking into the chauvinistic stupor of overconfidence. Sure, our economic growth over the past few years has been staggering. However, this growth is tethered to a single, finite resource. More crucially, according to Florida's framework, is the fact that Calgary is not exactly famous for cultivating the kind of tolerant and dynamic environment that is attractive to the creative class. "You want to watch out for the kinds of problems they've had in Texas," Florida warns in a phone interview, "where wealth is concentrated in some political and social backwaters, so people don't want to live there anymore."

One of the most intriguing arguments in Florida's new book relates to the "personality" of cities. Again, this tends to work in two different directions at once: cities gradually assume the psychological complexion of those who live in them, while certain personality types will necessarily gravitate toward particular places. To characterize the personality of cities, Florida employs a conceptual vocabulary developed by personality psychologists who have identified five main dimensions of human character: openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. Of these, openness to new experience is the most directly related to economic growth.

What are the dimensions of Calgary's personality? I would put conscientiousness at the top of the list: we tend to pride ourselves on our hard work, our sense of duty and our scrupulousness. A close second would be extroversion: we tend to be very outgoing and assertive, particularly at certain times of the year (i.e. during the Calgary Stampede, the Red Mile, the University of Calgary's Bermuda Shorts Day and so on). One thing that we are not, unfortunately, is open to new experiences and new ways of doing things. We are, after all, the city that just overwhelmingly endorsed a Conservative majority for the umpteenth time. We may be welcoming, but we are not diverse. We may be bright, but we are not open-minded. If these things matter, as Florida insists that they do, then Calgarians had better hope that the oil holds out for a good long while.



Astonishingly, however, Florida maintains a positive opinion of the city. "Calgary has a bright future," he says. "The outdoor amenities are second to none. You have the mountains, sunshine — these are the kinds of things that attract idea-driven people." When you look at it this way, however, many of the best things about the city of Calgary have very little to do with Calgary *as a city*. Indeed, there is a strong undercurrent of pastoralism running through *Who's Your City?*, and Florida's emphasis on natural esthetics, open spaces, parks, trails and clean air has the ironic effect of pointing one away from urbanity entirely.

These passages made me think of another "idea-driven" person, Henry David Thoreau, who shared Florida's core values of creativity, ingenuity and natural beauty — but whose ideals took him in precisely the opposite direction. "I have found no exertion of the legs can bring two minds much nearer to one another," he wrote in *Walden*. "What do we want most to dwell near to? Not to many men surely, the depot, the post-office, the bar-room, the meeting-house, the school-house, the grocery, Beacon Hill, or the Five Points, where men most congregate, but to the perennial source of our life, whence in all our experience we have found that to issue, as the willow stands near the water and sends out its roots in that direction."

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