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The great cities of the future

Interview with Richard Florida

Richard Florida is one of the world's leading urbanists. He is a researcher and professor at the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto. He is well known for having written several global best sellers, including the award winning "The Rise of the Creative Class" and his most recent book, "The New Urban Crisis", published in 2017. He is also an entrepreneur, as founder of the [Creative Class Group](#) which works closely with companies and governments worldwide. A 2013 *MIT Technology review* study named him the world's [most influential](#) thinker.

It is often said that, in the future, the world's population will be concentrated in the biggest cities. In your opinion, is it true?

The trend of people migrating from suburbs to cities has already been set in motion. In 1980, around 39 percent of the world's population lived in cities. By 2015, this number had grown to 54 percent. So long as cities remain the economically and culturally robust centers that they are today, they will continue to attract an influx of new residents. But the *new urban crisis*—born from the very success of cities—also threatens to undermine this growth. As cities become increasingly segregated, unequal, and unaffordable, they stand to alienate not only prospective residents, but also longtime residents who are now being relegated to the suburbs or areas outside the urban core. The future of population growth in cities depends on our ability to mitigate these urban divides.

In your new book, "The New Urban Crisis", you write about the risks caused by an increase in urban inequalities. Is this related to the social rise of the Creative Class, hi-tech professions, and startups?

Indeed, the book argues that the very characteristics that made cities so successful in the first place—their density, economic vibrancy, cultural amenities, innovation, job opportunities, and so

on—have generated a new set of challenges. As talented members of the Creative Class—spanning science and technology, arts, media, and culture, and traditional knowledge professions—have flocked to city centers, they have forged a divide between advantaged, affluent residents and just about everyone else.

We often imagine cities of the future as smart cities, hyper-connected, digital and green. Is that a realistic portrait?

Many cities have achieved incredible feats when it comes to technology and sustainability. In recent years, cities like San Francisco and Pittsburgh have served as test beds for driverless technology pioneered by companies like Uber and Lyft. At the same time, cities like Miami, New York, and Houston have set aside significant funding for sustainability initiatives like elevating roads, installing solar panels, and electrifying vehicles. But even these innovation and sustainability efforts have the potential to compound urban divides both between residents and across urban neighborhoods.

In your book you talk about the need for another New Deal. What do you mean?

Many New Deal-era policies can serve as examples for our modern cities. Following the Great Depression, people were willing to pay a premium for durable goods like cars and appliances, which helped underwrite the American middle class. Today, our middle-class is disappearing due to a lack of sustainable, family-supporting jobs and overall affordability in cities. By paying service and blue-collar workers a premium in the form of a living wage, cities have the potential to revitalize their waning middle-class sectors. The New Deal also serves a model for the devolution of power to the local level. During the New Deal era, Roosevelt forged a partnership between cities and the federal government, allowing individual localities to have a role in addressing their own urban challenges. It's time to do so again, only this time the balance of power should favor cities and municipalities, not the federal government.

Is the boom of real estate in city centers a bubble or an irreversible trend?

I see little evidence of the trend slowing down. Global cities expert Saskia Sassen estimated that, by 2015, corporations had accumulated more than \$1 trillion in urban real estate. As large companies and high-tech industries, along with wealthy plutocrats and sovereign wealth funds, become even more invested in downtown urban cores, they will continue to spur development and density in cities.

From China to the U.S., will the world's big cities tend to look like each other in the future?

Already global cities are defined by their shared characteristics—namely, high levels of density, innovation, and economic growth alongside similarly high levels of segregation and inequality. But many global cities like New York and London have been successful at cultivating a unique quality of place, which has been instrumental to their success.

**Will the future of cities be more and more in the hands of the mayors who oversee them?
What policies should they put in place?**

Prior to the Trump presidency, I made a sweeping case for a National Council of Cities consisting of mayors and urbanists who would report directly to the president. Now, I am convinced that mayors must address and solve their own urban challenges. Already, we are seeing cities and mayors join together to uphold the goals of the Paris climate agreement or provide a safe haven for immigrants. I remain optimistic that these groups can evolve into a broad, bipartisan coalition that contests the federal government on issues such as voting rights, immigration, LGBTQ and women's rights, gun control, the minimum wage, environmental policies, and more.

From the point of view of environmental sustainability, what will the cities of the future be like, less or more polluted?

It all depends on where their priorities lie. A city like Beijing, which declared a "war on pollution" in 2014, is poised to become much less polluted in the future. At the same time, studies show that the air quality has deteriorated in cities like New York and Chicago. Moving forward, cities must make reducing emissions and improving air quality sound planks of their urban agendas.