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An Interview with Richard Florida

By: Tracy Certo



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In his new book, *Who's Your City*, Richard Florida says the creative economy is making where you live the most important decision of your life. The world is not flat but spiky, he argues, as today's key economic indicators—talent, innovation and creativity-- are concentrated in strategic areas, not spread out evenly across the world. He brands the



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mega-regions in the world, including the Chicago-Pittsburgh corridor (Chi-Pitts) which is the third largest. And he ranks American cities for best places to live at different stages of life. Regions, like people, have distinct personalities, according to researchers. While New York and the west coast have a concentration of those open to experience, the Mega Midwest region is dominated more by conscientious folks.

From the wealth of place to the geography of happiness, Florida spins a new way of looking at our place in the world today. Is it for real? Or as Steven Colbert joked at the end of his humorous [interview](#), which is in the book, is he simply a "gay, bohemian artist who just wants to sell his house?"

We recently interviewed the author who went out of his way to point out that the good life can be found in places like Grand Rapids, Muskegon, Grand Haven, and Holland.

(Note: In some cases, Mr. Florida's responses are edited and condensed for space.)

So now that you were on the Colbert Report, does that preclude you from going on the Daily Show?

No! We wondered that, too! We're working on that as we speak.

You write that the real source of economic growth comes from the clustering and concentration of talented and productive people and that today's global economy is powered by a surprisingly small number of places. So what's to become of the rest of the world?

Well, I'm scared, and one of the reasons I wrote this book is because I'm scared. The book is an empirical observation, the way the world is, not the way I wish the world would be.

Look, if we believe in this mythology that the world is flat, that anyone can plug and play and compete from anywhere, we're missing the point that economic resources, resources required for invention, are really concentrating in a way that few people, even leading urbanists, understand.

More than 50 percent of us live in urban regions. These 40 mega regions [around the world] with less than 20 percent of the population account for about two-thirds of the world's economic output.

What the book says is either we have to figure out a way as a world, which looks like a long shot given the bandwidth of our national politicians, to push up the valleys, or we have to understand that, like it or not, their [people's] economic future may depend on their ability to move.

Help me better understand the connection between living in a powerful mega-region like Chi-Pitts and, more specifically, living in a city within that region that's in transition.

Chicago's growth really sucked up all of the services and headquarters functions and lawyering and financial and accountancy that used to be done in the Detroits, the Pittsburghs, the Cincinnati's, the Akrons, the Toledos. Chicago has become in a way the business and financial center for the Chi-Pitts regions, and it's become extraordinarily expensive.

So, one can make quite a nice life in a Grand Rapids if they find ways to connect to that Chi-Pitts mega region. The places in the mega region that are really at an advantage are places like Ann Arbor. College towns in that mega region have a particular advantage.

How can a city in this mega-region, like Grand Rapids, Detroit or Pittsburgh,



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**better compete in the global economy?
Is it a matter of amenities or mindset or
both?**



First of all, I think they all have this great advantage [just by being located] in a nearly 2 trillion dollar mega region which is one of the most innovative on the planet. They're also close to the second largest mega-region on the planet, the number one in North America which is the Bos-Wash (Boston-Washington). The question is how do they want to compete?

They have one of the greatest clusters of universities in the history of the planet. They're producing phenomenal talent but, unfortunately, that talent leaves. So, in *Rise of the Creative Class*, I said the one thing it needs is to become more open minded and tolerant. It needs to be more diverse and inclusive.

Some of that's happening in certain parts of the region. More foreign people are moving in, though not enough. They're becoming more open minded to the gay and lesbian population, though not enough. I don't think it's a question of making jazzier restaurants or hipper bike trails. It's a question of being more open-minded.

Another thing the region suffers from is really poor leadership. And I think the reason that is, it really bears the imprint that as the economy is changing to newer things, away from manufacturing, the leadership still reflects that top-down, vertical, 1950's organization mentality. So you get these conflicts between old-style democratic political machine and business-led organizations. Those conflicts become very dysfunctional. Older cities must achieve better leadership, leadership that is more in tune with the future.

What's your view of Grand Rapids, MI?

I love Grand Rapids. I've been there a bunch of times. Some of my earliest work on creativity was done with Steelcase. Clearly the legacy of innovation, and if you think about the creative economy, the work systems that actually make you productive, it seems to me that there's no better place than Herman Miller and [the local office furniture industry]. And it's not just making furniture. It was started by hardwoods there and they made this great furniture for the industrial age. But it's been on the cutting edge of root-based work, making creative work teams more effective.

Plus that lake! We spent a lot of summer time in Northern Michigan, is there any more beautiful place in the world? So I think Grand Rapids is suffering *less* from the problems in Michigan than the rest of it, but as the state begins to turn around over the course of the next four or five years, I think Grand Rapids is a place with a very bright future, because of its mix of the area, lakefront amenities which can be very exciting for empty nesters' second homes but it has this incredible core of research and innovation in its work.

In your book you map the different personality types dominant in different parts of the country.

Every region has every personality type, some high concentrations of certain personality types. [The Chi-Pitts] region has had a high concentration of manufacturing; they needed very conscientious people to work in those industries. I think that what's happened over time is that the 'open to experience' people, who are the most likely to move, are the ones who have moved away.

What about the theory that it's easier to affect change in a place like Grand Rapids, Muskegon, or a smaller city?

We hear this from people at the absolute tops of their careers. First of all, the pull of home should never be minimalized. The fact that every close friend or family member you leave behind costs you \$100,000 in psychic income. I'd be the last person to put a dollar value on friendship and family ties, but if you're leaving 6, 8, 10 people behind, that's a lot of psychic income. Second thing is, people want to be in a place they can affect change.

This quote that I've always loved--this young man in Providence said to me, "Rich, I was living in San Francisco. So I can take San Francisco from an 8.5 to a 9.2? When I moved back to Providence, I had a place that is a four that I could make an eight."

This ability to be involved, to be physically involved, to be socially involved, involved with

your friends, your family, *and* be in a place that's easy to navigate. The problem with New York or even Washington, where I lived, is that they're not only hard to make it (change), they're hard to navigate.

Tracy Certo is the managing editor and publisher of [Pop City](#), Rapid Growth's sister publication in Pittsburgh.

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