

Interview with Richard Florida

MASON RIDDLE

RIDDLE: Tell us a little bit about your new book, *Who's Your City?*

FLORIDA: In *Who's Your City?*, I make an argument about the importance of place in the global economy and how it is creating a spiky world. Where we choose to live is the single most important decision we make. It has a profound impact on the jobs we have access to, our career path, our social networks, family and lifestyle choices, the wealth we accumulate, and, ultimately, our overall happiness.

Also, in the book, we provide the first-ever rankings of cities by life stage, rating the best places for singles, young families, and empty nesters. As a result of these new ideas and data, *Who's Your City?* can be an essential guide for the more than 40 million Americans who move each year on how to choose where they live and what those choices mean for their lives, personal happiness, and the larger community.

As a context, most public art in this country is found in urban areas, or in public parks in small towns. Could you please comment on the general function and importance of public art?

Public art plays two roles in a community: It helps to create an authentic sense of place and serves as a tool for revitalization. Quality of place is one of the defining issues of the creative economy. Places that are aesthetically pleasing help to attract innovative, creative talent. The arts can also help play a role in revitalization. Investment in the arts (galleries, public arts, common spaces, etc.) provides public leaders with a viable alternative to the large capital investments such as stadiums, convention centers, and so on.

In spite of a demanding publicity tour for the publication of his new book, Who's Your City? (Basic Books, 2008), Richard Florida, the prolific author, public speaker, American urban theorist, and director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto, carved out time to give an exclusive interview on the still uncharted terrain of public art and the suburbs. Florida, the author of the acclaimed The Rise of the Creative Class (Basic Books, 2003), clearly understands the importance, to any community, of creative thinkers and cultural workers, whether they are urban planners, architects, chefs, or artists.

In researching your books, including *The Rise of the Creative Class* and *Who's Your City?*, what have you learned about public art, if anything—whether it is found in an urban, suburban, or even rural environment?

A community's aesthetics are extremely important; public art can play an important role in a community's overall appeal. Our research indicates that the higher people rate the beauty of their community, the higher their overall level of community satisfaction. Human beings crave physical beauty. We look for it in so many of the things that surround us, and especially in the communities and places we live.

To be compelling, does public art need to be about place making? Does it need to be thoroughly integrated into its architectural and/or community context?

Absolutely. Creative workers need and want to live in authentic communities. Public art that is tied intrinsically to its community will help to create a sense place that is unique and appealing to creative workers. Public art can also help highlight a community's soul, history, and uniqueness. An authentic place offers to us characteristics by which we can define ourselves, and a physical and figurative space in which to live. Public art helps to place a connection between the authentic identity around us and the place we live.

Do suburbanites face different challenges than urbanites when embarking on a public art program with regard to process, financing, and aesthetics?

Suburbs, like urban areas, face some of the same challenges—creating a sustainable, safe, and authentic community that is appealing to the creative class. In terms of process and financing, the challenges will be different from community to community. As I explain in *Who's Your City?*, each creative worker is looking for a unique community; some want to live in the urban core while others find the suburbs appealing. Stakeholders and leaders in various geographic and demographic regions must work together to make each community within that region the best it can be. Perhaps the use of public art throughout an entire region (the urban core and suburbs) can help create a unified feel and sense of cohesiveness.

What does a work of public art need to accomplish when sited in the suburbs in order to be compelling?

It needs to be authentic. It needs to represent the people who live in the community. Art, especially public art, helps to give a community an identity. The art has to be consistent with the vitality and soul of the community.

