

Ken Gray . Who's your Ottawa?

Let's see how the capital performs on urban critic Richard Florida's guide to choosing your home

Ken Gray

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Cities do not consist of freeways, buildings, transit systems, houses, malls, sidewalks, hydro wires, sewers, water mains, snowplows, corporations or government.

Good cities consist of good people. Like a vibrant company, they tap their best people -- those with intelligence, energy, integrity, goodwill and a large well of experience -- to do the best things. With a critical mass of good people, all the other elements of urban living -- transit, wealth, a healthy environment ... the list goes on and on -- fall into place.

The key to successful cities in this age of increasingly specialized labour demand and a slowly eroding petroleum economy is to attract topnotch people who can adapt to the fundamental changes occurring in our community now.

Thus the key is to get creative people to come to your company, government department, hospital, university and community. This idea didn't originate with Richard Florida, it's as old as the hills. But Mr. Florida has certainly advanced, popularized it and shown its importance.

To paraphrase Mark Twain, you can't throw a brick these days without hitting Mr. Florida.

He is perceived by some as the second coming of Jane Jacobs, the great urban critic. The late Ms. Jacobs moved to Toronto, even participating in the legendary fight against the Spadina Expressway. Mr. Florida has followed in her footsteps. He recently took a position at the University of Toronto where he is professor of business and creativity at the Rotman School of Management. He also heads a think-tank that tracks major currents in society.

His arrival on Canadian soil has spurred a bit of a media frenzy. That, coupled with the promotion of his latest book, *Who's Your City?*, has him in newspapers and other media across the country. In fact, he recently addressed Ottawa's *Celebridée*, the great speakers series associated with the Canadian Tulip Festival that featured the mercurial author Salman Rushdie.

Mr. Florida built his reputation on a book titled *The Rise of the Creative Class*. In it, he suggests that economic development is tied to cities that have large numbers of artists, musicians, technology workers and tolerant cultures that foster innovation



CREDIT: Pat McGrath, The Ottawa Citizen

If you apply the conclusions of Richard Florida's book *Who's Your City?* to Ottawa, this municipality looks extremely successful. However, columnist Ken Gray says the community is not getting that message out to the creative people the city needs to prosper.

and enjoyment of life. That process steamrolls into creating a society that attracts more of those kinds of people. An example Mr. Florida uses is that of Austin, Texas, which has a vibrant music and cultural scene, is the home of the University of Texas with its massive research facilities, and is where cutting-edge firms such as Dell have chosen to locate. Mr. Florida maintains that for a urban area to prosper, it must attract creative people to fuel the innovation required to keep a city in the forefront of economic development.

In his new book, Mr. Florida establishes a set of criteria for his much-coveted creative people to choose where they want to live. So what does Ottawa need to attract these people?

Extrapolating on Mr. Florida's idea, this community has to sell itself as a place where a person can make a career for a lifetime.

First, Ottawans must be able to show these future entrepreneurs that there is enough depth in the job market to sustain their upward mobility, or that this is a place where new companies and innovation can be created. Certainly there is room for career advancement in the huge public service located here. The question is, can it be a place where innovation and flexibility can meet the needs of these free-spirited future employees? Can it appeal to the creative?

Ottawa's high-tech sector certainly can, though our lack of head offices makes it difficult for career advancement. Thus our community must be the sort of place that is appealing to startup businesses and large corporate entities as well.

Second, the city and its opportunities must be so appealing that people are prepared to travel far away from their family and friends to take advantage of new jobs. That's a tall order but certainly if our institutions excel in areas such as health care, research, higher learning, public service and high-tech, people might be prepared to make that sacrifice.

Third, the city itself must be incredibly appealing. From kayaking to skiing equipment shops in Westboro, to bike paths, to restaurants, to hiking in the Gatineau Hills, to nightclubs in the ByWard Market, Ottawa must be so attractive that what it offers will be able to lure people away from the Texas Medical Centre or Microsoft or other levels of government. That's how competitive the market is for creative people. And if Ottawa doesn't get those people, the city will fall behind in a world increasingly based on innovation.

Fourth, Ottawa needs to promote itself as a place has a creative core. And it has that. With two major universities, places such as the Ottawa Heart Institute, a huge public service full of thinking people, the National Research Council, nationally renowned think-tanks, superb consulting firms and companies doing cutting-edge high-tech, there is depth to this community like few others in Canada or the world. If you are intellectually inclined, you must think of Ottawa as a place to live.

Fifth, Ottawa must appeal to people of all ages. It does. Singles will want a place to meet people to date so the nightlife of the ByWard Market or the coffee shops around town are important. Families will find a community that is safe with superb facilities for recreation and education. Our crime rates are decreasing markedly. Housing is inexpensive, perhaps not by Winnipeg or Regina standards, but an amazing bargain compared to Vancouver, Victoria and Toronto.

Ottawa is a good place to live, but not perfect, at least by Mr. Florida's standards.

One problem that Ottawa must overcome is our lack of a modern transit system. The Transitway, cutting edge transportation 30 years ago, looks horribly antiquated today. With the downtown legs of the Transitway running near capacity, people are being left at suburban stations by full buses, and ridership increasing by between four and seven per cent annually, public transit in Ottawa is straining. As a Florida associate asked during in an interview recently: Does anyone move to a new city to

ride the bus?

Mr. Florida has a small section of his book devoted to: "Does the place get it?" So does Ottawa get it? Not really.

This city has developed as a livable city to the extent that it has by happenstance. It is unlikely Queen Victoria, when she chose Ottawa as the capital, really knew of its beautiful location. The federal government, the area's biggest employer, created a large, thinking population not through any strategy, but rather because it needed good people. The think-tanks, the consultants, lobbyists, the politicians, even the high-tech industry chasing government computer contracts in the early microchip days, followed.

The coffee shops, the Mountain Equipment Co-ops, the yoga places, the theatre, the orchestras -- they just chased these creative people.

The community has, in fact, lagged. Its sprawl, lack of density, monotonous suburbs, aged public transit are characteristic of a civic administration that just barely keeps up to the needs of its populace. It does not lead, it follows, it reacts. The city treats its rivers like sewers rather than great public recreational assets or, say, drinking water. Our schools of higher learning are adequate to good, but nowhere near great, and uncharacteristic of the institutions that should serve the capital of a G8 nation.

No, the city doesn't get it. When the chronically underfunded municipality discusses budget, the first things cut are the vehicles that sell a city. We do not promote this community for superb place it is. And that means Ottawa loses outstanding young people and entrepreneurs because they buy the myth that Ottawa is the city that fun forgot. People who live here know differently.

In the competition to get the best people, the city fails itself. Get those talented individuals -- the artists, the businesspeople, the innovators, the academics, the intellectuals, the superb public servants -- and they not only take care of themselves, they take care of the life of the city. Those creative souls generate business, entertainment and innovation so that Ottawa will grow imaginatively by itself. That's what a great metropolis does.

Ottawa has most of the characteristics that make up Mr. Florida's criteria for the best places to live. Ottawans just don't sell this place very well. Promote this city properly and creative people will flock here. It's that fine and smart a place to dwell.

Then creativity would come from the hundreds of thousands of people who live here rather than a few elites. That's when this city's leadership will have got it. And Ottawa will have arrived on the international stage.

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