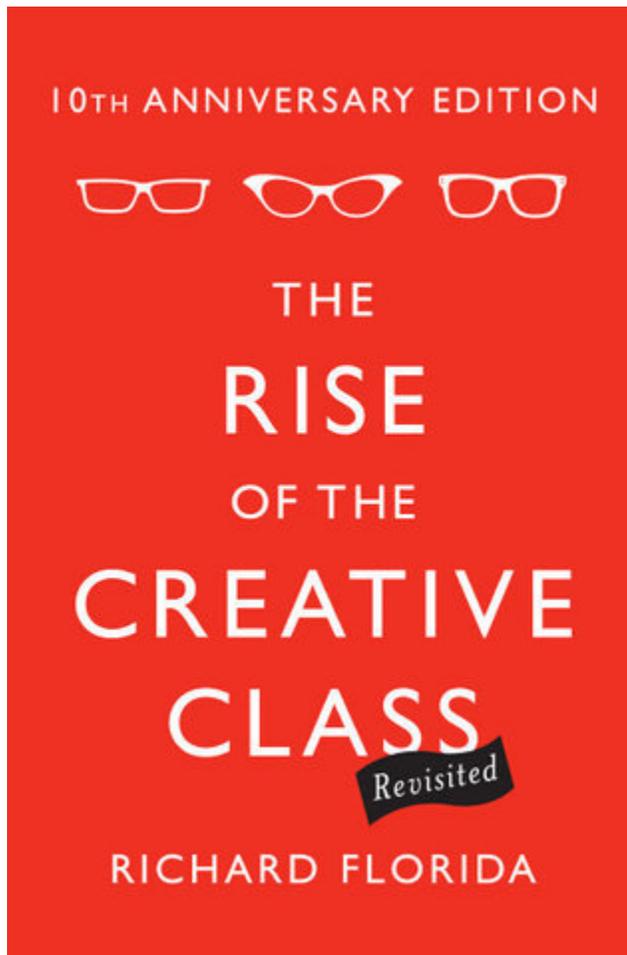


Miami now winter home to ‘creative-class’ thinker Richard Florida

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Just published: Richard Florida has extensively revised his seminal 2002 book. Richard Florida, the college professor whose bestseller on what he dubbed “the creative class” helped make America’s cities hot again and turned him into an intellectual rock star, doesn’t idly pick a place to meet for a conversation.

So on a warm Miami afternoon, Florida (that is his real name) occupies a sidewalk table in Wynwood, the once-desolate warehouse zone whose emergence as an arts district has been defined by an explosive propagation of graffiti murals. The table belongs to Panther Coffee, which is run by young and hip — or does that go without saying? — entrepreneurs who roast, grind and blend their own beans.

A decade ago, in the landmark *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Florida was among the first to frame and popularize the notion of a back-to-the-city movement led by artists, gays and other bohemians, not as a niche phenomenon but as the leading edge of a vast shift that has made urban centers and the creative people

they attract — not just hipsters but science, tech and design types, media workers, entrepreneurs and, yes, owner-baristas — the engine of U.S. innovation and economic growth.

Florida’s presence here — just as the extensively revised, 10th-anniversary edition of *Rise* is published — would seem to confer a blessing on the endeavors of Panther Coffee, Wynwood and the sprawling, still-unformed city that contains them.

He's not just visiting. The avatar of the Creative City, whose main job is running an institute for the study of economic prosperity at the University of Toronto, is settling into a bayfront South Beach condo where he and his wife and business partner, Rana, will live and work winters.

If the Floridas come to Miami, does that mean Miami is ready to take its place in the creative economy alongside San Francisco, Boston, Seattle and Washington, D.C.?

"Oh, we're way past the tipping point," he says, already speaking proprietarily of his part-time hometown as he cites the city's food trucks, South Beach, Art Basel and the resurgence of downtown Miami, the Design District and Wynwood. "We've become this singular kind of destination. The investments this community made in the arts really paid off."

Miami's newfound cultural allure, and its design-focused urban revival, he says, have made it a location of choice for people who, like the Floridas, could live anywhere. That includes CEOs with Beach pied-a-terres, DJs, star chefs and Latin American tech entrepreneurs. (The sunshine helps, he admits.)

What's happening in Miami illustrates a key corollary of the creative-class theory, Florida says: The creatives who drive today's economy — now about a third of the U.S. workforce — seek out cool places. That means walkable neighborhoods with distinctive architecture, a diverse population, a vibrant street and cultural life and amenities like cafes, bars, parks and bike lanes. As the creatives rub shoulders, they generate new ideas and enterprises that propel economic growth and attract even more talented, creative people. Florida, a hyper-productive writer, prolific public speaker and senior editor at *The Atlantic* magazine (whose fast-growing *Atlantic Cities* website he helped launch), drives home one central point: Manufacturing and the working class have been supplanted as the nation's principal source of prosperity by the creative class and the knowledge-based economy, and cities with the right environment enjoy a huge competitive edge.

"If you want to understand where ideas come from, they come from cities, which are social and economic engines," he says. "When you put people in close proximity to one another, we leverage each others' skills and talents. This is the motor force of our economy. "

Moreover, unfettered suburban expansion, which he has called "the great growth illusion," has been proven by the economic crash to be unsustainable and unappealing to the young, he says.

"What's been happening here in America, this suburban thing ... that's over. There is a generational shift."

Some critics

That's the sort of pronouncement that makes Florida's critics, of which there are a fair share, gnash their teeth. Some dismiss his theory as elitist, and critics on the right and the left say it lacks academic rigor, overstates the role of urban creatives, glosses over the downside of gentrification and ignores the abiding allure of the suburbs, where the majority of Americans — including multitudes of creative types — are perfectly content to live.

“He had one idea and he’s going to stick to it,” said Joel Kotkin, a California writer and urban historian who has often debated Florida. “He’s giving a well-heeled sector of our society what they want to hear — that being hip and cool is great, and that people want to live in high density. It doesn’t have anything to do with people having children and buying a house that’s affordable.

“It’s a very good theory for a small segment of society, and not an unimportant segment. But it’s very limited. There’s not enough yuppies on the planet to save Detroit,” Kotkin says.

More fans

But to his legions of acolytes, Florida has been the prophet and standard-bearer of an undeniable urban turnaround evident in Google’s moves into downtown Chicago and Ann Arbor, Mich., and the conversion of San Francisco’s skid row and forgotten Brooklyn neighborhoods into hotbeds of startup tech, among many examples. His broadest influence, along with a measure of celebrity (Bono name-dropped him at an Irish economic conference last year), grew out of the embrace of his theory by urban activists, business groups and mayors from Miami’s Manny Diaz to New York City’s Michael Bloomberg.

“He named something that everybody was fumbling around in the dark with, and he turned on the light,” said Christopher Leinberger, a Florida friend and collaborator. “In the urban world he is one of the stars. He’s a household name. And a real lightning rod.”

The original edition of *The Rise of the Creative Class* sold more than 300,000 copies, a startling number for an urban-theory book that, while readable and sprinkled with anecdotes, is full of charts and statistics. It spawned a lucrative second career for Florida as a public speaker and a consultant to cities and companies looking to burnish their creative cred.

It didn’t hurt that Florida, 54, has what used to be called matinee-idol looks. Tall, dark, fit and fashionably clad, he seems the embodiment of the creative type.

Or maybe it did hurt. In Toronto, where he arrived to great fanfare after the university created the institute just for him, activists started an anti-Florida website that took aim not just at the inequality they said he promotes, but also at the Floridas’ sumptuously renovated home.

“He is this incredibly handsome, urbane, smooth academic. And academics aren’t supposed to be that way,” Leinberger said. “And some people are bloody jealous.”

Florida, in fact, has taken pains, especially in the new edition of *Rise*, to acknowledge that creative cities are also characterized by economic disparity, in part because the concentration of prospering creatives drives up housing costs. He has urged the introduction of elements of the creative economy into the service sector that employs 47 percent of Americans by building in opportunities for advancement.

Some downtrodden towns that hired Florida to develop creative-city redevelopment strategies failed to realize economic benefits. He says he never promised quick or easy turnarounds, and some urbanists say his clients had unrealistic expectations.

“Who’s come around with a formula for turning around Flint, Mich.?” said Aaron Renn, a respected analyst who writes the Urbanophile blog.

“Florida himself has shown much more concern for the poor and downtrodden who have been crushed by this economy than some of his critics. Maybe there’s been an overemphasis on artists. But whether art causes prosperity or it’s just correlated, it’s clear that you want lots of art in your town.”

Florida has also made it a point to acknowledge that suburbs will retain a key role, but only if they become more like cities — pedestrian-friendly and better connected, and with urban amenities. His thinking is grounded in years of data-driven research going back to his days as a young urban economist at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, which was undergoing a gradual transformation from smokestack loser to new-economy success. But it has its origins in his Italian-American upbringing in Newark, N.J., where his factory-worker father was a casualty of the downward economic spiral that swept much of urban America in the 1960s and ’70s. Even in manufacturing, Florida observed, companies that engaged floor workers in problem-solving did better. In his most controversial insight, he realized that thriving cities were home to high proportions of gays, lesbians and other bohemian types, and he developed an index to rank them.

The three T’s

That confluence led him to the core of his theory, the three T’s of prosperity: tolerance (as measured by the proportions of gays, immigrants, minorities and bohemians), technological prowess and talent, as defined by the number of people engaged in creative endeavors. He found cities that scored highest in all three also enjoyed the highest growth rates.

It’s not that artists and bohos cause economic growth, he says; it’s that cities with such populations appear to be accepting places where talented if unconventional people can thrive. Four of 10 creative workers don’t actually have college degrees, he says, which undermines his critics’ charges of elitism.

As it happens, the Miami-Fort Lauderdale metro area that is Florida’s new winter home ranks relatively low on his creative-cities indices. But it does score 11th in the nation for tolerance, a factor he says bodes well for the region’s ability to attract and retain talent.

Florida says he and his wife have plunged into Miami life. He’s found it more complex than he expected, and at times more perturbing, especially the extremes of wealth and poverty.

He hopes to become publicly involved — he’s already spoken out against a plan for downtown casino, which he says would be “a disaster.” And he is talking to the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation about launching an “ideas” event in Miami. One route to prosperity for the city, he says, could be as an intellectual incubator for Latin America.

“Miami is for me a great laboratory,” Florida says, citing not just Wynwood but also developer Craig Robins’ ambitious plans to remake the Design District into an urban luxury retail center as a milestone in the U.S. urban revival.

“Can you create it? That’s what’s uber-interesting to me. Wynwood and the Design Center are not great places like Georgetown or London. But there is an urban scale that’s being rescued in a magnificent way. If these people in Miami can really do it, then you might be able to do it just about anywhere.”