

Cities are the Key

Increasingly, our world turns on 40 mega-regions populated by creative people.

AUTHOR, professor, and urban theorist Richard Florida says society's success is inextricably bound to the success of our great cities. And yet, the growing concentration of wealth and human capital in urban areas is leading to greater inequality, with a person's prosperity determined increasingly by location. Florida explores social and economic trends in his numerous books, including the seminal *The Rise of the Creative Class*, published in 2002, and the more recent *Who's Your City? How the Creative Economy is Making Where to Live the Most Important Decision of Your Life*.

You've said the world is becoming "spikier" by the day.

What do you mean? I'm referring to how the world's centers of innovation and economic development are becoming much more concentrated. And as these spiky places, whether Silicon Valley or the Beijing-Shanghai mega-region or the Bangalore-Mumbai corridor in India, become more prosperous, they're becoming more economically and socially distant from the rest of their countries. So the world is getting spikier and also more unequal as a result.

Is the 21st century the century of the city? No doubt about that. In 2008, the world went urban—with more than half the population now living in urban centers. The world now turns on these great conglomerations of cities we called mega-regions, the Boston–New York–Washington corridor, the areas that stretch from Chicago to Detroit and Cleveland to Pittsburgh, Greater London, Greater Tokyo, the Brussels–Antwerp–Amsterdam corridor, and so on. These 40 mega-regions house less than 20 percent of the population but produce two-thirds of the Earth's economic output and nine in ten of our innovations. Cities are the key to all the grand challenges of the century. Economic prosperity comes from density. It comes from close interactions. It comes from people and firms clustering together to spur new innovation and to leverage each other's talents to create new technologies and new ways of doing business that will drive growth and raise living standards.

You spend a lot of time in Toronto and Miami. What do those two cities teach us?

In many ways, Toronto is the model of a Frost Belt city. So many American

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Frost Belt cities have been devastated by decline. For nearly 20 years in Pittsburgh, I watched that city brought to its knees before getting on the road to recovery. My wife is from Greater Detroit. I've seen the despair that hit that city and Cleveland. But Toronto has not only remade itself but has been able to thrive. Banks are regulated and stable. The housing market appreciates, as it always has, modestly. Most of all, Toronto maintains a functioning core. So many U.S. cities have what I call a barbell demography. On one end, they have young singles, gays and lesbians, couples with no kids, and on the other end they have a lot of empty nesters. But they don't have a lot of families with children in the center. Toronto, though, has less advantaged families, working families, middle-class families, and wealthy families living right in the city. It also has perhaps the largest population of foreign-born

people of any city in North America, showing us how to, almost marvelously, handle immigration and build what Canadians call a mosaic rather than a melting pot.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 30



Woe of the business class: Florida travels the world but rarely has time to escape the hotel.

JOHN HRYNUIK

ONE ON ONE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 26

And what about Miami? It's a classic comeback city. Once plagued by crime and all sorts of dysfunction, and recently devastated by the real estate bust, it has made a fairly broad rebound. The Southern Florida mega-region, which also includes Tampa and Orlando, is quite an economic powerhouse with a strong future because of its international ties. The United States has the Atlantic economy facing Europe and the Pacific economy with Los Angeles and Seattle and San Francisco facing Asia. Now Miami gives the country a third face looking toward the rising economies of Latin America.

What role does sense of community play?

It's becoming much more important, especially because so many of us live alone or have to move far away from family and childhood friends. That sense of community becomes our anchor. I'm very drawn to places that have this distinctive sense of self, a distinctive soul. One of our biggest challenges is how to remake our suburbs, which tend to be generic. How do we create character? How do we make them more livable and purposeful?

What's going to happen to destinations we cherish for their sense of place?

I think back to my parents' or grandparents' generations. When they traveled or moved from the U.S. to Europe: Poland, Paris, or London—never mind Asia or Africa—they had a completely different experience from being at home. There were completely different places to stay, different foods, different fashions, not to mention different languages. Now I'm struck by the degree to which our world has become homogenous. Whether we're in France, the United States, China, or Japan, we tend to eat the same foods, wear the same clothes, drive the same cars. But then simultaneously, people are trying to find what's unique and authentic in the world, and that interest makes those things rise in value. In some ways, capitalism is wrapping its arms around a place's sense of history and authenticity, viewing them as economic assets, a storehouse of value and profits. And yet, popularity threatens those assets. Coming to grips with that contradiction is an important challenge, because once that history and authenticity are eradicated, they're impossible to get back. ■

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