

Pittsburgh –The “Base Case” Turns the Corner

Richard Florida

There’s no question that I’m rooting for Pittsburgh. I spent nearly two decades of my life in the city, from my late 20s to my mid 40s. Carnegie Mellon, where I taught from 1984 to 2007, made me a researcher. Observing and grappling with Pittsburgh’s ongoing transformation shaped my intellectual agenda and my life’s work as an urbanist.

In my book [*The Rise of the Creative Class*](#) I called Pittsburgh my “base case” for the transition of a formerly industrial city to the creative economy. Although my prognosis was guarded, I concluded it on a positive note. “If Pittsburgh, with all of its assets and its emerging human creativity, somehow can’t make it in the Creative Age,” I wrote, “I fear the future does not bode well for other older industrial communities and established cities.”

I came to Pittsburgh in the late 80s to be part of the newly established Center for Economic Development at Carnegie Mellon. I immediately got to work with a fantastic group of colleagues to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the city’s troubled economy. I had been struck by the economist Benjamin Chinitz’s classic 1961 essay, [*“Contrasts in Agglomeration: New York and Pittsburgh,”*](#) based on research and policy work in both cities, which argued that Pittsburgh’s economic decline, already setting in back in the early 1960s, was an outgrowth of its highly specialized heavy industry economy – only Detroit’s was less diverse. In striking contrast, New York’s economy was both more diverse and more entrepreneurial, the source of its considerable resilience.

Beginning in the late 40s and 50s, Pittsburgh’s leaders had already begun to chart a course to revitalization. The vaunted partnership between the Allegheny Conference, the economic development vehicle of the old industrialists led by Richard King Mellon and Mayor David Lawrence, pioneered a top-down approach to urban revitalization, clearing neighborhoods to make way for gleaming new high-rise towers, sports arenas, parks, and a new downtown core. It destroyed many functioning urban neighborhoods, communities and businesses and provoked the ire of great urbanists like Jane Jacobs. That approach continued well into my time in Pittsburgh, when billions were spent on new stadiums and a convention center.

In time another, more powerful model of development began to bubble up– one that drew from the region’s real underlying strength, the diversity and resilience of its great neighborhoods, from the Southside to Lawrenceville and Oakland and more. It also benefited from foundation funding, which enabled the rise of Pittsburgh’s community development movement, which serves now as an exemplar to the nation and the world.

For quite a while, and for much of my time in Pittsburgh, those two approaches were at odds. But, in time, an accommodation has emerged. As the old top-down became somewhat discredited and certainly less aggressive and hegemonic, new space was opened up in which

the bottom up approach could gain real strength. As the two began to accommodate one another and hew more closely together, sometimes in cooperation, other times in tension, a new synthesis emerged which combined the strength of the region's large institutions – its universities, hospitals, and research centers, its foundations and its arts and cultural groups - with the incredible energy of its neighborhoods and people.

Ten years later, the synthesis and transformation is palpable. Pittsburgh has become a technology and talent hub. Its progress in attracting and retaining talent, to take just one indicator, has been remarkable. Nearly half of the city's 24 to 34-year old workers have bachelor's degrees, according to a [2010 study](#) by the University of Pittsburgh's University Center for Social and Urban Research, a number exceeded only by Austin, Washington, DC, San Francisco, and Boston.

One thing that could really up the ante is high-speed rail. Pittsburgh is the bookend to Chicago in the great Chi-Pitts mega-region, home to more than 40 million people and nearly \$2 trillion in economic output. Just as improved rail service has bolstered the economic heft of the great Boston-New York-Washington corridor, high speed rail would connect Pittsburgh to Chicago, Detroit and Cleveland to the west, Toronto to the north, Washington to the southeast, and Philadelphia and New York to the east, allowing it to emerge as the key hub between two great mega-regions. Together, they would rank as the world's fourth largest economy, after the United States as a whole, China, and Japan. High speed rail would provide Pittsburgh with the connective fiber, size and scale that would enable it to exploit its geographic location, knowledge-based assets, great livable neighborhoods and affordable housing in an even more powerful way than it does already.

Still, there are some key things the region needs to work on. One of the most urgent is openness to diversity. Numerous studies have shown its importance. In Silicon Valley, for example, new immigrants number among the founders of anywhere from a third to half of high-tech startups. While progress has been made, Pittsburgh still has among the lowest proportions of immigrants of any US metro. A 2011 Brookings Institution study, profiled in the [Post Gazette](#), named Pittsburgh the third whitest metro in the nation. And the region ranks 300 out of a possible 361 on my own measure of diversity and openness to new ideas. With so much redevelopment occurring in downtown and the neighborhoods, growing gentrification and heightened inequality and widening class divisions, within the city as well as between the city and its suburbs, must become a top priority.

With Bill Peduto taking the mayor's office, Pittsburgh will finally have a leader who can mesh global economic forces with the region's world-class knowledge institutions and incredible, authentic quality of place, embedded in its rivers, parks, natural environment, industrial heritage, historic buildings, and great neighborhoods. To my mind, he is the personal synthesis of Pittsburgh's older top-down and its newer bottom-up approach to redevelopment. He has the skills and platform to bring this new model to the national and global stage.

Pittsburgh's revival has been no overnight sensation. It took the better part of a generation or two for it to get to where it is now. But without a doubt, it has turned the corner. With the same kind of resolve and resilience the city has always shown and with the benefit of its new leadership, there is no reason why its future should not be brighter still.

Richard Florida lived in Pittsburgh and taught at Carnegie Mellon University from 1987 to 2004. He is currently Director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto, Global Research Professor at NYU, and founder and Editor-at-Large of *Atlantic Cities*. Thanks to Don Carter and Doug Heuck for helpful comments.