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Q&A with Richard Florida: Who's Your City?

By: Tracy Certo



April 2, 2008

In his new book, *Who's Your City?*, [Richard Florida](#) says the creative economy is making where you live the most important decision of your life. The world is not flat but spiky, he argues, as today's key economic indicators—talent, innovation and creativity-- are concentrated in strategic areas he dubs mega-regions.

From the wealth of place to the geography of happiness, Florida spins a new way of



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looking at our place in the world today. Is it for real? Or as Steven Colbert joked at the end of his humorous interview, is he simply a "gay, bohemian artist who just wants to sell his house?"

We recently interviewed the author who went out of his way to point out that the good life can be found in Pittsburgh.

(Note: The answers were edited and condensed for space.)

You write that the real source of economic growth comes from the clustering and concentration of talented and productive people and that today's global economy is powered by a surprisingly small number of places. So what's to become of the rest of the world?

One of the reasons I wrote this book is because I'm scared. Look, if we believe in this mythology that the world is flat, that anyone can plug and play and compete from anywhere, we're missing the point that economic resources, resources required for invention, are really concentrating in a way that few people, even leading urbanists, understand.

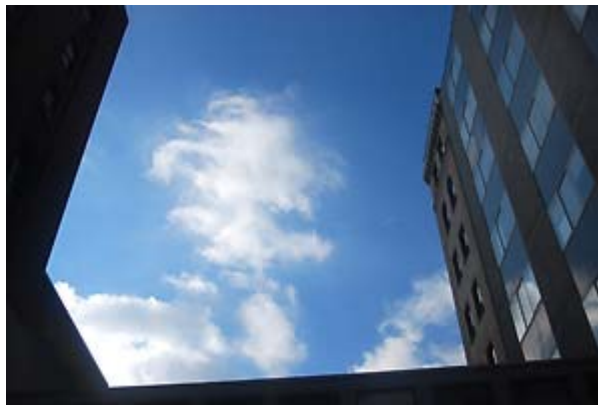
More than 50% of us live in urban regions. These 40 mega-regions (around the world) with less than 20% of the population account for about 2/3 of the world's economic output.

We need to be aware of that because it definitely challenges some places. Yes, it challenges places like the Pittsburghs, but they can adjust. It's going to be harder for the Akrons or Toledos to adjust, and much much harder for the places in Latin America or the Middle East or in Asia so we have to be conscientious.

Help me better understand the connection between living in a powerful mega-region like Chi-Pitts but in a city in that region that's in transition.

I spent 17 years in Pittsburgh and my wife is from greater Detroit. We are big fans of rustbelts. I like older, urban cities. The thing is that Pittsburgh and Detroit are in one of the biggest mega-regions in the world. The Chi-Pitts mega region, the third largest in the world and the second largest in America. And I think that's an interesting way to think about it.

A place like Pittsburgh or Detroit is well positioned, even though they may have experienced some hard times in the past couple decades ago, to be thriving places. And certainly, someone can lead a very, very, very thriving career in Pittsburgh or Detroit because you're inside one of the world's biggest mega regions.



Chicago's growth really sucked up all of the services and headquarters functions and lawyering and financial and accountancy that used to be done in the Detroits, the Pittsburghs, the Clevelands, the Akrons, the Toledos. Chicago has become in a way the business and financial center for the Chi-Pitts regions, and it's become extraordinarily expensive.

So, one can make quite a nice life in a Pittsburgh or in a Detroit if they find ways to connect to that Chi-Pitts mega region. The places in the mega region that are really at an advantage are places like Ann Arbor. The college towns in that mega region have a particular advantage.

How can a city in this mega-region better compete in the global economy? Is it a matter of amenities or mindset or both?

First of all, I think they all have this great advantage, in a nearly 2 trillion dollar mega region which is one of the most innovative on the planet. They're also close to the second largest mega-region on the planet, the number one in North America which is the

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Bos-Wash. (Boston-Washington) The question is how do they want to compete?

One thing that it needs to become is more open minded and tolerant. It needs to be more diverse and inclusive. I don't think it's a question of making jazzier restaurants or hipper bike trails. I think it's a question of being more open-minded.

Another thing the region suffers from is really poor leadership. It still reflects that top-down, vertical, 1950's organization mentality so you get these conflicts between old-style democratic political machine and business-led organizations.

Where is political leadership a model today?

We've certainly seen the transition in Denver with the election of John Higgins, and with John Norquist in Milwaukee. Even with Rich Daley. Maybe the model of a mayor for the



Chi-Pitts region is a guy like Rich Daley who comes from a machine politics background, but has renamed himself as a mayor who can understand the future of the city, can understand the need to do new things, to support new economic sectors, be open minded in regard to young people, foreign born people, the gay and lesbian community.

I've always said that in regard to Pittsburgh, the biggest plus is the fact that people there

actively want to rebuild and make their communities better.

In your book you map the different personality types dominant in different parts of the country.

Every region has every personality type, with some high concentrations of certain personality types. Those regions (Chi-Pitts) have had a high concentration of manufacturing; they needed very conscientious people to work in those industries. I think that what's happened over time is that the 'open to experience' people, who are the most likely to move, are the ones who have moved away.

We used to think it was highly educated people who were moving; I think what we're now discovering in this fantastic work with Sam Gosling of the University of Texas and Jason Rentfrow, from Cambridge University is that the people most likely to move are open to experience.

I think it's one of the most interesting findings of the research I've been involved in over the past 30 years.

How was the research done on personality types in various regions across the country and why is Pittsburgh the only other city besides New York that shows a concentration of neurotic types?

It's a sample of 650,000 on this five factor model of personality. The five factors of personality are extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroses and open to experience. It 's a basic personality type that psychologists probe for.

There's a lot of explanation for this, but one that comes up time and again is that places that are cloudier, that have grayer weather, for some reason have higher degrees of neuroses. I think another factor about New York, is that because of it's stress level, because of its incredible pace, and because it attracts people who are likely to be kind of individualistically thinking, also has an even higher score on neuroses. It's a very interesting finding, and as much as I could quote Jason on it, being that he thinks there's something in the climate, in the historical migration pattern.

We're going to spend a lot of the summer together really digging into these data and trying to understand better what is actually causing these populations. We really need to



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understand this because it's such a geographic factor that people didn't think about before, that we need to explain and it really has a lot to do about how regions perform.

What about the theory that it's easier to affect change in a smaller city like Pittsburgh? In our publication, we hear this a lot from people who return from major cities.

I hear this from people at the absolute tops of their careers. First of all, the pull of home should never be minimized. Second, people want to be in a place they can affect change.



The problem with New York or even Washington, where I lived, is that they're not only hard to make it, they're hard to navigate.

You never see the same person twice. In a place like Pittsburgh, you get to see all the great acts and shows and music you want to hear, you can get a ticket, but you're likely to bump into

your friends almost everywhere, and therefore you build a community and constituency.

I've never seen a group of people so change oriented. And we still use this in all of our work in all of the communities all over the country, we talk about the wonderful things we did in Pittsburgh. Whether it was in the North Side with the Mattress Factory and the Andy Warhol, with Ground Zero and with Flux and the Ultraviolet Loop, I think part of that is because the place is small and the activist community, catalytic community, is easier to build.

One of the things, just so you know, that I've been tracking very well is that despite continued political problems in Pittsburgh, I think Pittsburgh's rebirth is one of the great success stories of North America.

Glen Meakem, founder of FreeMarkets (now Arriba) has said that he's a contrarian. If someone tells him he has to go to New York to make it he'll make it in Pittsburgh.

I'm working with Christos Cotsakos in his new start-up; he formed E-trade which was in the valley. The new start-up's in West Palm Beach. Why? There were a lot of people looking for an exciting opportunity and it was easier to mobilize and build a community. People weren't commuting two and a half hours each way to work. I think lots of people, lots of entrepreneurs are looking for those kinds of places.

You don't have to be in the Silicon Valleys of the world to make this happen. I think one of the things that's important there is that the universities play a really big role.

Pittsburgh ranks high on your list as a place for empty nesters (#14) and retirees (#2, best buy) and yet we've always been known as a great place to raise a family.

Pittsburgh has a fantastic arts and cultural scene, phenomenal universities, and is a place where you can navigate easily, get involved and get invited to stuff. I just think it's a phenomenal place for empty nesters and retirees, so I think Pittsburgh should play that up like crazy.

Empty nesters and retirees are close to my age. Empty nesters are 45-64. And look at the company (in the rankings)--Portland, Maine. Seattle, Washington.

Places that are good for singles



and mid career professionals have a very keen ability to translate that into a great place for families. People move to Washington DC or San Francisco which score high in both lists.



I know it sounds far fetched, but one of my hunches with the coming baby-boom retirements and empty nesters, the parents are going to follow the kids. How are mom and dad and the kids, if you have two or three kids, going to afford to make this move to Greater Washington or Greater San Francisco?

They're not. But certainly people can have a great go of it in Pittsburgh. With a wonderful life and wonderful houses. I think Pittsburgh should at least put this on its radar screen. I think the mistake in Pittsburgh has been going after the 35 year old with a family and trying to lure them back, not that you shouldn't do that, but focusing on that exclusively. I think focusing on retaining people who are graduating college and grad school and focusing on empty nesters would be at least, if not more, productive for the region.

This is something that Carol Coletta's group in CEOs for Cities is already working on.

If Carol's doing it, you're doing something at the absolute cutting edge. So I think that's a great idea.

And the baby boom is the wealthiest generation in history. It's not your grandfather's empty nester and retiree. They're a vibrant, excited, wealthy group of people. I really think that Pittsburgh should go after this like gangbusters, and it's likely it'll pay huge dividends in the future.

[Tracy Certo](#) is publisher and editor of Pop City.

Captions:

Richard Florida

Downtown Pittsburgh

The Great Race

The New Dinosaur Hall at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History

Phipps Conservatory

***Image of Richard Florida courtesy eponymous
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