

Feature

Shape-shifter In the City

OCAD's new direction
by Noah Richler



The August morning is sunny and bright and around the tables of the Starbucks patio, business is being done. A man double-parks his BMW on Yonge Street, indifferent to the traffic. The driver behind him leans on his horn. A bicycle courier yells an obscenity as she cycles past. Around the corner, on a residential street a construction crew is pouring cement and the sonorous bass din of the truck's rotating drum mixes with the screech of worn metal parts. We are in the city and Richard Florida, its eloquent narrator, is wearing sunglasses as he leans back in his chair and basks in its polyphonous splendour.

“James Rojas, the Los Angeles urban planner, came to Toronto and wrote about its ‘messy urbanism,’” says Florida. He laughs, “Man, I wish I’d come up with that phrase.” Toronto, despite the sombre intent of the city’s official plans, is a wily, spirited and surprising place, its energy not easily contained. It is a place where businesses, as much as the residents, now reinvent themselves in its nooks and crannies. Or, as the Ontario College of Art and Design has done with the Sharp Centre for Design—Will Alsop’s justly celebrated brick of a building suspended on multicoloured stilts—in the space *above* the street.

“I wish we had a dozen OCADs,” says Florida. “Toronto is never going to capture the biggest buildings, but there are aspects particular to this city that display to the world how you can be big, and messy, but also sustainable. Not in some granola way, but *imaginatively*. That’s very good for Toronto, because design problems are enormous in the world and thinking about design penetrates just about everything Torontonians do.”

Rojas’s “messy urbanism” and OCAD’s iconic building are proof of Florida’s argument that cities are the hubs of today’s “creative class,” which is propelling a new economy that prospers by virtue of its urban aggregation. “You can’t build a creative industry,” says Florida.

“You have to build a creative *society*. Industry will follow.”

Florida’s fascination with cities is the result of the urban environment having provided him with a way out of a working-class New Jersey boyhood. Early on he realized that the city was the draw—a concatenation of creative people needing to *invent* jobs, solutions and lives in the absence of the mining, agricultural or even manufacturing work that would otherwise reliably allow them to prosper. And he realized that this aggregation fostered its own advantages—that cities were nuclei around which the economies of nations could reorganize themselves.

“Ninety per cent of university graduates enter the creative class, but less than 50 per cent of the creative class have a degree,” says Florida, ruminating openly. “Did you know that?”

In Toronto, now home—Florida joined the University of Toronto’s Rotman School of Management in July, 2007—his ideas have had a particular appeal. Perhaps this is because in Canada our cities are young, so the decisions that people arrive at in them actually make a difference. Or perhaps it is because, according to the astonishing demographic inversion of the last few decades, more than 80 per cent of Canadians now live in cities and not the rural areas that shaped the country’s destiny and politics for two centuries—as well as, arguably, the objectives of a Conservative government rumoured to be sending Canadians to the polls at the time we spoke.

“If a party can espouse an anti-urban political platform and get elected, then it will slow economic growth and there’ll be trouble,” Florida said. “And I worry about that, because the divide between the cities and the countryside is actually a tension between the resource and creative economies, and in America that divide has become quite explicit and ugly. Canada has managed it much more efficiently.”

Sitting with Florida, his enthusiasm infectious, it was evident that even behind the sunglasses he was not ceasing to notice, scrutinize and assess the city around him.

“You can have really shitty governments for ten years and still do well because economies are not top-down anymore,” suggested Florida. “You have this group of incredibly talented people operating at the level of the city—Mayor Bloomberg, in New

York, and Ken Livingstone for years in London, David Miller here. In politics, the force in the world today is no longer the federal state *but the city.*”

Florida might easily have added Sara Diamond to that list. Diamond was raised in Toronto, taught at Emily Carr in Vancouver and was Artistic Director of Media and Visual Art and Director of Research at the Banff Centre, where she also created the Banff New Media Institute, before she was appointed, in July, 2005, as the twenty-first president of the Ontario College of Art and Design. In her inaugural address to the school, the following year, the school’s new director made it quite clear that she had a plan—and that Richard Florida’s ideas about “deep clustering,” and the advantages her school might bring to the creative economy, were among her guiding lights. Diamond describes herself as “a real internationalist and in a big way—a Londoner, a Los Angelena and a Buenos Aires girl.” She has had big ambitions for OCAD from the start. “In Canada,” said Diamond when, the following morning, we met in her OCAD office on McCaul Street, “we don’t appreciate our arts institutions in the way that, say, the English do, but you have a creative and an intellectual class in the country that’s leading in its knowledge and understands the instrumental role that culture plays. My sense of mission is for ours to be a school that is in the top tier of art and design and media post-secondary institutions in the world.”

OCAD, which at its inception observed staid Toronto from the city’s placid western reaches, is now a part of the city proper—bounded by Spadina to the west, the University of Toronto’s campus to the north, busy University Avenue to the east and Queen Street and the CN Tower to the south. While the school is rooted in the venerable tradition of the Group of Seven, it is seizing, under Diamond’s leadership, an altogether different destiny—an image and a sense of itself that are a reflection of the changing city as well as very much shaped by it. In only a couple of years, Diamond has thrust OCAD into the vanguard. She has made a veritable manifesto out of Florida’s ideas about crosspollination, promoted ties with business and community leaders in the city and launched a Digital Futures Initiative and an Aboriginal Visual Culture Program covering art, media and design—just a couple of the offerings that the school, a university since 2002, is developing. As someone who relishes the challenge of negotiating with other business leaders and hobnobbing with government, Diamond clearly wants the school to become an integral city player, both leading and *inspiring* the new economy. In her address, Diamond proclaimed that

In this new Age of Imagination, excellent, successful products, services and processes make use of sophisticated art and design skills. Art and design engage our values, each in different ways—in the ways we imagine our lives, in the balance of pleasure and functionality. Artists and designers sniff the zeitgeist, and, having sensed the future, they have the disciplined imaginations that can blend emotion and form. Artists and designers are enablers, facilitating collaboration across a wide array of fields, shaping excellence and “experience” products in every field of human endeavour.

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“OCAD,” says Diamond, “made an incredibly bold decision when it decided to go ahead with Will Alsop’s building and, at the time, it was condemned for doing so. But when it became a reality, people in Toronto had their socks blown off. It fuelled an architectural renaissance in the city and, concomitantly, the school had to ask, ‘Where are the gaps?’ ‘How can we rise to the occasion in a city that likes us?’ The changes that are happening here are not about abandoning the school’s 133-year legacy but about drawing from that history and asking what the school can do in this new world, in the city that is the research capital of Canada.”



The magazine is based on one advantage: that this one made... (text continues in columns)

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OCAD’s location—close to other universities, hospitals, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the city’s media and theatre districts and business—has provided the school with a thriving situation, though it is her students’ diversity that perhaps excites Diamond most of all. The multicultural student body with which Toronto has provided OCAD is eager, competitive and inventive, such that even the yellow stairwell descending from the Sharp Centre has been transformed into a gallery of politically motivated graffiti art. (The theme was antiwar when I passed through.) Its polyethnic dynamic is a clear manifestation of Florida’s ideas about how urban clustering results in the unexpected—and the creation of wealth.

OCAD’s current sensibility is underpinned by the business ties that Diamond is fostering and by the transformation of OCAD into a credited university. The school’s ability to offer students degrees is a tool that Diamond as well as students can use to add value to the school’s titular poles of “art” and “design.” Society has been in the habit of imagining a tension here. We tend to think of the former as the inherently “creative” pursuit—and one whose practitioners, says Florida, are typically less susceptible to authority or conventional corporate hierarchies—and the latter as more manageable and commercially inclined. It is a friction that Diamond recognizes, but one that, she believes, can

contribute to rather than hinder the development of those “disciplined imaginations that can blend emotion and form.”

“In Canada, because of the nature of arts funding,” says Diamond, “we tend to see ourselves as operating outside the market, but young people move quite easily between support systems and practices; so there is a great deal of malleability between the two poles. We want to keep those frictions in play and that’s why the ethical discussion is so interesting. Can we have a critical practice? What is our influence outside? At OCAD, this discussion is happening all the time—at the student, program and faculty levels. It’s understood that design is changing so fundamentally that the debates about how research is managed, or how these fields interact at a global level in a world of AIDS, poverty and sustainability challenges, are actually quite Heideggerian.”

Diamond is frank about being a “keen lobbyist” and is proud of how OCAD is developing a “deep cluster strategy about how to bring people together.” It is an essential part of her platform, which foregrounds research, community involvement and viable contributions to the market. Under her tutelage, the school has identified a set of “institution-wide thematic priorities” that deliberately anticipated the budget priorities of the Government of Ontario.

OCAD’s greatest advantage, however, still resides in the fact of the city itself being the greater studio. Only the studio has been altered and aggrandized. In OCAD’s early days, its location in the park named for the Grange—the old York-era building that is now part of the Art Gallery of Ontario—typified thinking that was, by virtue of its context, perhaps experimental but certainly somewhat agrarian. But now the city sprouts around OCAD and demands a different dialectic, something Diamond is taking full advantage of. “Toronto,” she says, “is at a really interesting moment in terms of its lack of allure, architecturally, so that new projects have real *gravitas*, and in terms of technology are about making ugly corners beautiful and sustainable. Part of the advantage of Toronto having such a positive awareness of these issues is that there’s an arts scene that just keeps going. Toronto has a force and a *quality* of growth that makes it a very exciting ally.”

For Florida, Toronto is an example of “what geographers call a new spatial fix.” In history, he explained, there was the town, the industrial city and then the suburban one, but now there’s a new kind of urban form such as you see in Toronto and Mississauga—one that has both an intensive *and* an extensive reach.

“We’re developing a new kind of city and who knows *what* it’s going to look like,” Florida has said. “Perhaps a *dense mass*. The countries that can figure these places out and the infrastructure that will support these new sorts of megacities that are urban and suburban at the same time are going to have a real economic advantage.”

If Diamond has her way, then OCAD will have made a contribution.

Such may be the school's, and Toronto's, *avenir*. And yet an equally fundamental point about urban context is that all cities have a distinct character and each is rooted in a particular history and place.

We will respectfully borrow and acknowledge the Métis tradition of the runner—the community facilitator who ran from home to home, bringing news and editorial, linking stories and ideas within a community, and binding together fragments, playing a provocative role in anticipating, initiating and facilitating dialogues, healing conflicts...

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The nature of Toronto and the city's own relationship to place is that—as John Ralston Saul has argued in his book *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada*—it is a city in a Metis, not a European or American mould, though it lacks an appropriate vocabulary to discuss or take advantage of this fact. OCAD is helping to develop that vocabulary. The day before we spoke, Diamond attended a meeting of OCAD's Aboriginal Educational Council, of which James Bartleman, the part-Ojibwa former Lieutenant Governor of Ontario (and now Chancellor of OCAD) is Chair. Following on her experience in Alberta, Diamond believes in and promotes the qualities of negotiation and respect, and the inclusive values of the Circle that Saul believes are integral not just to the First Nations but to Canadian civilization as a whole. She has used these ideas to improve OCAD's syllabus and anchor it in a geography that extends beyond the immediate city.

“Like any other part of Canada,” says Diamond, “Toronto is actually an Aboriginal place. There are more than 17,000 Aboriginal Canadians living in the metropolitan Toronto region,” she continues, enthusing about the optimism and qualities of leadership and self-realization that, contrary to the popular mythology, she encounters on the Aboriginal Educational Council. At OCAD, where courses in Native art have been offered since 1990, she has embarked on a full-scale Aboriginal Visual Culture Program, which is expected to be launched in its entirety in the academic year 2010–11. This is not a hollow gesture. It is intended, in keeping with her Floridian ideas, to augment not just students' consciousness of art but their readiness for jobs, and includes plans for a meeting place and improved links to the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation.

The program will be, in effect, another means of bridging that often calamitous divide between rural areas and the gregarious city. “Along with the Sustainability Program,” says Diamond, “the Aboriginal Program is *absolutely* a way of allowing us not to forget the non-urban and to respect that even in the most nomadic of Native cultures there is always a profound relationship to place.”

Diamond wants the best. She wants excellence. But she is circumspect about the place of a school that, no matter how original or stimulating its program, no matter how exciting its urban environment, is nevertheless situated in a city that, by virtue of Florida's own laws of aggregation, lies a concentric ring or two outside North America and Europe's uncontested metropoli — London, Paris, New York and Los Angeles—and the greater professional clusters and possibilities that exist in these cities, not to mention other world

centres like Mumbai, Beijing and Mexico City. She expects her students to step out into the world—wants them to. And so she speaks of Canada as “an amazing base for artists and intellectuals to act globally,” but also of “the need to build a loyal culture in the city that sees the world outside Toronto and that has worked outside Toronto.” Eventually, she knows, the vitality of OCAD’s student body—its fecund diversity, the dynamism born out of Toronto’s “spatial fix”—will reward a city that may learn, in time, to appreciate its arts institutions more.

She can wait. In the meantime, there’s enough excitement at her gates.