



## Talking with Richard Florida

**The urban guru on Vancouver's green beauty, high costs, Olympic fever and more.**

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Richard Florida became guru to city shapers with his 2002 best seller *The Rise of the Creative Class* and now follows with *Who's Your City?*, written for the person in search of a place to settle. Florida's championing of the "creative class" as a driving factor in cities' economic success is widely embraced but controversial, a discussion examined in [today's companion piece](#).

The Tyee caught up with Florida earlier this summer on the second day of his first visit to Vancouver. The 51-year-old academic and author is stylish, well-tanned and impeccably groomed. He's equally at home leading discussion at the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto or lighting up the society pages, mingling with Belinda Stronach. When asked for his impressions of Vancouver and how it fits in with his theories of what makes urban life vibrant and prosperous, here's what he had to say...

#### **On Vancouver's draw for the global 'creative class':**

"Obviously, it's an immigrant city, people who want to migrate, risk-taking, open-minded self-expressive. Our earlier data from 2001 -- we're updating to the new 2006 StatsCan data -- suggests that Vancouver is a first-class creative city, has a high ranking on our creativity index. It does pretty good on high tech -- not quite San Francisco level, maybe not Seattle level -- but very good in technology-based business. Large creative class, highly educated human capital. It's better than most U.S. cities or North American cities on openness to diversity. Large gay and lesbian population. Obviously incredible diversity of foreign-born people. It does pretty well.

"I think the things that strike me personally, as my first time here, I'll just be quite candid: one is the incredible natural beauty. And I think particularly the green. Vancouver has to be the greenest large city I have seen even by Seattle

or San Francisco comparisons. Incredibly green. The integration, too, of the natural and built environment. This is becoming a theme in my work and it's pointed to in *Who's Your City?* when we did the Gallup survey: the importance of quality of place and sustainability and environment.

"Vancouver, I think, better than just about any city in North America, and probably comparable to some Australian cities, does a wonderful job of being both urban and natural. And my hunch is that's a kind of environment that appeals to more and more people.

"The other thing that strikes me -- on one side it's a positive the other side a not-so positive -- is that this city is just incredibly affluent. It really boggled my mind even compared to Toronto, which ain't shabby, compared to Seattle. We flew into the airport, just the number of high-end luxury cars that I saw in the parking lot was quite mind-boggling. Then to see the residential neighborhoods as you drive from the airport."

### **On the climbing cost of living in Vancouver:**

"This city is becoming very unaffordable. For young people in particular, you want to start a band, you want to do film, you want to have a high-tech company, you want to be engaged in civic and non-profit work.

"Vancouver is obviously becoming unaffordable for working families. And that really worries me. Because at the same time Vancouver is more affluent and has greater wealth, it means that a lot of that creative and human energy needed to be successful can't afford to be here. So I think that's a two-headed monster. I know that people in Vancouver are thinking about it, in comparison to the U.S. where they don't even think about it, but I think it's going to become an issue in the future."

### **On why urban planners should read *Who's Your City?*, and not just people city shopping:**

"I think I made my case for urban planning in *The Rise of the Creative Class*. I think that urban planners and economic developers and civic officials found that book challenging and provocative and asking good questions.

"Many disagree with the work, both from the right and the left. Some people say, well, 'Florida neglects good schools and safe streets.' Others say 'Florida isn't progressive enough, he needs to do more things to make cities even more open-minded and inclusive.' But I think it asks provocative enough questions that urban planners and economic developers can resonate with. As in *Who's Your City?*, I tried to say to individuals: be aware. Be aware, make that choice, think about the city you want to live in.

"I think the best advice for planners though is that chapter in *Who's Your City?*

with the Gallup survey. That chapter really suggests that cities need to do a full plate of things. It's not enough just to have safe streets and low crime. It's not enough just to be gay-friendly and to have a great nightlife. A city has to

be safe and secure, it has to have great economic opportunity, it has to have a leadership that's engaging its population, it has to be open-minded and open-thinking and self-expressive. But it also has to have great quality of place.

"The other thing it says for urban planners, which is new for my work, is that even though I rate and rank cities, I think it says there's no single best city. I think what it says is each city occupies its own niche. For an individual there's a best city for you. That could be a big city, that could be a small town, that could be a suburb, that could be a rural area. For urban planners, it's saying: 'Think about what's really unique about your community. Think about the kind of ways it can affect certain groups of people. You don't have to be everything to everyone.' I think that's reasonably smart advice, to really think about what your city and community has to offer and to focus on that."

### **On the power and perils of mega-projects when it comes to attracting culture. The Olympics, for example:**

"I only know enough to be dangerous, so let me be dangerous and be suggestive without knowing the case and hoping to get to know the case of Vancouver better over the next few months.

"First of all, we always have to be wary of mega-projects. I know why New York bid on the Olympics. They figured out it was a way to solve all sorts of infrastructure problems and build things they otherwise couldn't. I understand that excuse, and I understand how it could be beneficial. But you have to be careful.

"One of the things we found from the people who study Olympic bids and mega-projects is that often those are one-of-a-type, one-of-a-kind uses and that Olympic architecture and stadiums don't fit in. Now, that typically is a summer Olympics phenomenon. The winter Olympics are different, but I think you have to do it carefully and in the context of your city.

"People say London and Barcelona have done a better job than many other cities, so you need to pay attention to that, and realize the Olympics have to be part of your neighbourhood and community fabric."

### **On Vancouver's push to create an 'arts precinct':**

"I worry a little about the creation of arts and culture districts. My hunch is that arts and culture, like any other function, work best when they're in a vibrant neighbourhood. When I lived in Pittsburgh, we created this very staid, sealed-off cultural district, where old people would pull up in their expensive cars with a chauffeur, but there would be no action around it. One of the things I really like about Toronto, where we live now, is that the arts and culture institutions are in vibrant neighborhoods, and there are galleries and there are night life venues and restaurants and it's all kind of confused and chaotic. So my hunch is that's the way you'll go in Vancouver anyway. The idea is that arts and culture are part of a vibrant neighborhood.

"I would hope that Vancouver creates markets for artists. In any plan in Vancouver, I would encourage, as much as possible, support for the people actually making the art."

**On whether he'll publish a *Who's Your City?* focusing on Canadian cities:**

"We're doing it [for] early January release. We've been crunching the numbers for a couple of months. While we're doing Canadian rankings (and those will be the core rankings) we're going to do an integrated assessment of all North American cities. So not only comparing how Toronto and Montreal and Vancouver stack up, but how do those cities stack up against the New Yorks and Chicagos and Bostons?"

"A lot of my Canadian colleagues say 'Toronto is a lot like Chicago' or 'Vancouver is a lot like Seattle or San Francisco.' We can actually look at these numbers and say if that true or not, and how they are unique or different."

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Richard Ravensbergen is a Vancouver writer.

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