

Author says Memphis is short of workers with creative skills

By George E. Hardin

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Now that the economic crisis is wreaking havoc nationwide, many cities are considering the action they need to take to remain fiscally strong and ensure adequate funds are available for the services they provide. Even before the financial meltdown urban communities in general had been facing setbacks caused in part by eroding tax bases, vacant downtown commercial spaces, insufficient housing and rising crime rates. As part of his urban policy program, President-elect Barack Obama has pledged to “strengthen the federal commitment to our cities, stimulate economic prosperity in urban areas and make housing more affordable.” The importance Obama places on this issue is seen in his creation of a new position, the White House Office of Urban Policy. He appointed New Yorker Adolfo Carrion to head the office.

Apart from Obama’s plans, over time various models have been advanced as solutions to enhance the urban environment. One of the most prominent in recent years has been the concept of the creative class of workers as a key element of metropolitan stability and progress. Perhaps the major advocate of this view is Richard Florida, an urban studies specialist, whose concepts are subscribed to by some others who hold prominence in his field. Florida claims that a city’s major economic strength depends on how well it attracts people such as artists, musicians, writers, entertainers, designers, workers in high tech industries and independent entrepreneurs. He says people in these groups do not usually think of themselves as a class but they have a common set of values. He believes, “The power behind the great ongoing changes of our time is the rise of human creativity as the defining feature of economic life.” And he adds, “Creativity has come to be valued—and systems have evolved to encourage and harness it—because new technologies, new industries, new wealth and all other good economic things flow from it.”

Florida’s position is contrary to conventional wisdom, which states cities should aim to attract big box retailers, factories, shopping malls, large companies with hundreds of workers, sports arenas and convention halls to enhance economic development. He believes cities are misguided when they “squander public dollars” to provide tax breaks for such ventures. He has won over mayors, city planners, architects and others with his concept, which he promotes in seminars, workshops and lectures, as well as the courses he teaches as a department head at the University of Toronto. Earlier he earned a doctorate at Columbia and was on the faculty of Carnegie-Mellon University and George Mason University.

From his research and focus groups Florida formed an index to rate the top 49 metro areas with populations of more than one million in the 2000 census on how well they fit the model he proposes. San Francisco tops the list. Rounding out the first five are Austin, Boston, San Diego and Seattle. Ranking 49th and last is Memphis. Above Memphis in ascending order are Norfolk-Virginia Beach, Las Vegas, Buffalo and Louisville. Florida calls Memphis—along with Detroit, Buffalo and Grand Rapids—a decaying industrial center that is likely to continue its decline.

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Florida's ideas were first presented in his book "The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life" published in 2003. He reaffirmed his basic principles in several subsequent books including one published in 2008, which claims that "the creative economy is making where to live the most important decision of your life." Creative cities are seen as rich in the three T's: technology, talent and tolerance. Tolerance, in Florida's view, includes an acceptance of ethnic and cultural diversity as well as gay and lesbian lifestyles. Although Florida has attracted some highly respected supporters, his concepts are attacked by some critics as elitist, exclusionary and in conflict with the American ideal of equality.

With the huge array of issues Barack Obama will face after he becomes president, it is yet to be determined how soon he will be able to address the core issues of his urban policy initiative. However, it is obvious that the longstanding issues facing metropolitan areas, especially the degeneration of inner cities—which disproportionately affect black people—are complex and intractable and must be dealt with aggressively as urban areas strive for advancement in the 21st century.

(George E. Hardin worked as a photographer, reporter and editor, and in public relations during a long career before he retired. His column appears every other week.)