

URBANTIMES

Interview with Richard Florida – Author, Professor, and Public Intellectual

ONE COMMENT 4 hours ago by JOSH O'CONNOR

I recently had the extraordinary opportunity to interview [Richard Florida](#) in conjunction with the release of his new book *The Rise of the Creative Class Revisited*. In talking to Richard, I had a chance to gain insight into how the current economic crisis has impacted the Creative Class, what fuels cities, and how we can transition into a more robust economy. The interview below will give you an idea of not only what to expect in the book, but of what we should expect from our future economic and labor situations.



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Josh: How has the “Creative Class” been impacted by the current economic climate? Do you think the current recession had any real effect on efforts to integrate them into economic development efforts?

RF: We had rates of unemployment among blue collar workers that were well above 10% and in some aspects of blue collar employment such as construction work, well over 20%. Rates were well over 15% for those people who actually made things and of course lower skilled service workers, the people who prepare our food and take care of us in restaurants or supervise our children or aging parents, they were also devastated by double digit unemployment. The overall rate of unemployment for the Creative Class over the course of the crisis never topped 5% and of course you have that same statistic as when you look at double digit rates of unemployment for non-high school graduates and compare it to 5% for college graduates. That's not to say that elements of the creative class haven't been as hard hit but it is to say that the Creative Class possessed the skills and ability to do better over the course of the crisis.

One of the things that is clear to me is that we just have to expand the number of people who are included in the Creative Class. I've been able to look inside the Creative Class a lot more over the last 10 years. I talk about that in the new book, with the help of great researchers and this new data that's been available from the [O*NET project](#) and from the Bureau of Labor Statistics we could look at the skills... I couldn't do that 10 years ago. When you look at the skills that workers have there are three key kinds. One is physical skill – blue collar skill or working skill. The other two kinds are cognitive skill – the ability to process knowledge, create knowledge and social intelligence skill – the ability to manage teams, lead people, perform business, build capacity. What we are finding is that are those skills drive Creative Class. When you add the social and cognitive skills to blue collar work, what we find is that in the best factories they are involving the workers... they're involved in continuous improvement, quality and teaming, but we're also finding in the service jobs that we think of as low-value added service jobs, when you add cognitive and social to those jobs, the wages go up faster. One of the big messages of the original edition of *The Rise of the Creative Class* that I think I'm even more forceful on in the new edition is that we have to make as many jobs and employment opportunities in this society creative jobs. We have to really harness that creative ability and creative line of work... upgrading work, upgrading blue collar and service work. We have to expand boundaries. Every single human being is creative and we have to tap that creative reservoir within each of us. That's the message that I'm trying to really focus on in the newly revised edition of the book.



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Josh: Can you provide an example of one of those transitions... how do you take your typical working class job and transition it into a creative job? What would we expect to see that look like?

RF: My whole theory of the Creative Class was inspired by work I did in the 1980s on the transformation of manufacturing in the industrial heartland. I was looking at which companies were deindustrializing and which companies were creating new investments. What I was finding is that companies that were deindustrializing and closing plants treated workers as a cog in the machine... saw them as a cost, not an asset... something that could be eliminated. The companies that were growing were the ones that viewed their workers as an asset and saw their workers and their ability to be involved in the work... to contribute new ideas, to be involved in continuous innovation and continuous improvement, to be part of suggesting quality systems. Those techniques were not only leading to higher rates of productivity, but in a big study I've done of green manufacturing it was worker involvement and worker knowledge and worker innovation at the shop floor and through the supply chain that were powering innovation and making plants more productive and greener. That's happening but we're now seeing traditional trades like butchery, distilling, barbering, becoming new and newly creative, some people call it artisanal work and artisanal manufacturing in places like Brooklyn. I've just seen new studies from [MIT](#) and published in [HBR](#) that are fairly broad gauged looks at service work. What these studies find is that when they engage service

workers whether that's someone in a Costco or a Wal-Mart or a Best Buy or a Starbucks or a Whole Foods... you can go on and on. When the service workers are engaged in the same kinds of efforts to provide to quality... they make better wages, they're paid a reasonable level, they're involved in teaming... not only does their attachment to their work grow but they deliver a higher quality service and the company is more efficient.

The basic example I'll use is that in a time when we're striving to make our buildings greener, when we're moving to LEED certified building, and when we're developing armies of architects and engineers to develop new sensor technology and more effective windmills and doors that close automatically it seems to me that the same thing I saw in creating greener factories goes double or triple for buildings. People that know about the building are one of the job categories put at the lowest end of the totem pole. The janitor. What if we saw the janitor less as somebody who cleans up our spills, cleans up our garbage, and makes sure the door is locked? What if we saw a janitor as someone as integrally involved in understanding how energy was used more efficiently... that windows were closed or opened when they should be, who are more trained as sensors to make sure our building performance was better? It seems to me that as we think about our future, our knowledge workers are doing okay, and the Creative Class is doing reasonably well; the big challenge in front of us is that an astounding number... more than 16 million Americans work in low skill, low wage service work. It's almost 50% of our work force. If we're going to drive our economy forward, if we're going to become more productive and effective we have no other choice but to upgrade that work. The only way to do that is by building on the knowledge and the creative skills of the workers that perform these jobs by valuing their creative and innovative capabilities.



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Josh: We are going through a transition in recent history from a period where cities were something to be avoided and the suburban lifestyle was seen as the ideal, into a context where cities have reemerged as a major element within today's society. What do you feel has caused this trend and are cities something that are here to stay? Are people going to continue to see cities as an area where they want to live?

RF: I think what powered the transition is the rise of this new knowledge driven, creative economy over the last two to three decades, particularly since the 1980s. Over that period of time in the US 20 million new jobs were built in the creative sector of the economy and the percentage of workers doing creative or knowledge-based work in arts, culture, entertainment, science, technology, business, management, healthcare, law... that grew from about 15% or less to over 30% and in some of our cities almost 45%. In some counties over 60% of our work force is currently engaged in this kind of creative work. Cities have become important because in the old industrial age it was the industrial corporation that was the key economic container if you will, the key economic unit. My dad worked his entire life from the day he turned 13 and got a job in a factory. He served in World War II, came back from war, and went back to work in the same factory. He worked in one factory his entire life. The company, whether it was IBM or GM... whatever company, was structured as our entire existence. We called it the industrial age or the organizational age... the age of the organization man. The structures that created work – the city itself –

our communities, our cities, our metropolitan areas have become the economic and social organizing unit of the knowledge-based or creative economy.

You know, Jane Jacobs identified this when asked what she thought her most important contribution was. She said it wasn't the things that she wrote about in *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, as important as they were, but that she thinks she identified how cities affect economic growth. She said that most economists including Adam Smith have focused on efficiency and further divisions of labor, but such factors can only tell you how things became cheaper or more efficient or how old work was done more effectively. It couldn't tell you where new ideas, new innovations, or new work comes from. That comes from cities. So cities are the basic platform of our new knowledge-based society that connect people to work. That's why I believe this chicken and egg dilemma is a false dilemma. Both jobs and people, they go together and cities themselves are the basic fulcrum for driving our economy forward. Whether the city is Silicon Valley in technology or Nashville in music and the litany goes on and on, but it's human beings coming together in cities that really foster innovation and productivity improvement.

We have three things now that really drive our economy forward. The first is technology, new innovation. The second is the skill we have, the human tap of the creative skill. And the third is our level of urbanization or our level of city building. The only complicated factor is that not all cities have done as well. What we've seen is a migration of some degree or a hierarchy where some of our biggest cities have done very well, like New York or the whole Boston, New York, Washington Corridor and along with some smaller cities that are very knowledge-based like the college towns. I was struck when I looked at our new creativity index rankings and found that not only was Boulder first but Ann Arbor was tied for 4th with Boston, Seattle, San Diego, and San Francisco being up high. I think that while college towns have done well, some of the other towns that have been more hard hit are older industrial cities which are finding their place. It doesn't mean rustbelt cities – Ann Arbor and Madison have done quite well, but I think many of those cities are now getting back to their basics and understanding that they have to invest in their creative capability making sure that they're open minded.

One of the things that I've come to conclude is the way that we think about urban and suburban is not helpful as it once was. What I find the really great neighborhoods that are walkable and interactive and have the right level of density, they're neither isolated suburban communities or a vertical skyscraper district that forms almost vertical sprawl with no interaction... the stuff that William Whyte bemoaned... the dead spaces around tall building. They're walkable, interactive, and human scale... you can find those neighborhoods in great cities but you can also find them in older suburbs which had a rail or subway connection or grew up on river ports. These older suburbs that dot our landscape are becoming quite desired because they have the right level of scale or interaction. We're talking about a new language that goes beyond the traditional way we used to use "city" and "suburb" – a walkable, interactive, human-combining, exciting, Jane Jacobs kind of neighborhood. That's where we have to bring our conversation. The old language handed to us in the industrial age increasingly doesn't fit the realities that we're confronted with.



Photo by Stephanie Vacher (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/trufflepig/3298829650/>)

Josh: Have you seen the “[The State of the Nation’s Housing Report](#)” put out by Harvard where they are predicting continued sprawl and more sprawled out single family living? It’s been criticized of course for not taking into account the desires of the current generation, but do you have any thoughts on that report?

RF: I follow their stuff with great relish; I think they’re a great group. In America we have a very skewed model of affordable housing – drive until you qualify. Drive further and further out on the interstate until you finally get to a point where the land costs and building costs are cheap enough that you can buy yourself a piece of the “American Dream”. What people are finding is that it’s not necessarily the best way to go. One, the housing values out there don’t go up very much so it’s not an investment that appreciates. But two, when you look at who can conserve resources in America or Canada, who can save a little money versus those that are spending every penny... the people in the “drive till you qualify” communities who have to have a car for every household member, who have to use that car to take their kids to school, to pickup groceries, to run errands, to go to the park that’s far away... they’re spending so much money on not only housing but the compounding money on cars and energy put them in the hock. Instead what we’re finding is that the people who sacrifice space can.



Image Credit: Harvard - State of the Nation's Housing 2012

We don't need to live in 5000 square feet of space it's just crazy. You know, I grew up with my mom and dad and my brother in New Jersey and I'll bet that we had no more than 1500 square feet of space... it was probably was no more than 1000 square feet of space between the four of us. We had one bathroom, a small kitchen, and two bedrooms. My brother and I shared a bedroom and we were perfectly happy. What younger people are saying, having watched the baby boomers go in the hock and go into debt and in some cases losing their houses and investments, is that they would rather live in a good location, they would rather not have to go broke on a car, they would rather spend money on things they like instead of spending money on gas, and they can live within their means. When I wrote the book *The Great Reset* that's what I was talking about. People making different kinds of choices brought on by the economic crisis. I teach at the [University of Toronto](#), it is an urban school

and the young people that are attracted to our school probably have an urban inclination, but my students come from France, the UK, the US. Several come from New York, Toronto, Calgary, Australia, Singapore, China, Hong Kong, from all throughout Europe. When I ask them in an exercise I have them do in making the city and community that they would like to live, "Where would you like to live?" prefaced by saying "You probably can buy a lot more house with a lot more square footage in the suburbs." Not one of them wanted it. They ask me questions like "Who would make that choice? Are they crazy?" What we know is that if you live in a robust urban location that has a good job market and a lot of things going on, that if you need to change your job you can and you don't have to be dependent on a car. You can keep your costs low. When I posed what we had traditionally thought in clear terms (I was trying to sell them on the American dream – these kids from all over the world). Not one of them wanted it. They want to know "Who would want to live like that?" I really do see this sentiment among younger college educated people or younger members of the Creative Class.

I guess the best to illustrate this is by way of another historical example. My dad who is long deceased now, he was eight when the stock market crashed and he was part of that generation who was formed by the Depression. He fought in the war; he came back from the war; he worked in the factory. He bought his piece of the American dream in North Arlington, New Jersey a bedroom suburb of Newark. My dad was 40 years old when he bought that house. I think what we're really talking about the shaping behavior

amongst the 8, the 10, the 11, and 12 year olds of today. As they see the ongoing effects of this crisis... the fact that homes are not appreciating... the fact that many people can't sell their homes. I think they begin to look at their location, their life in a new way. At the end of the day, what really creates the value anyway? It's not the building. It's not the sticks and bricks. It's the location. I think we're getting back to saying for the first time in a long time that the location you choose to live... that's the smart choice and the kind of space that you live within that location, that's a little more flexible and you can sacrifice some size for being in a better or more walkable/transit oriented location.



Photo by Laurie McGregor

Josh: If you had to recommend resources or books for those interested in being involved in the built environment aspects of their community and helping to attract the Creative Class, what would those be?

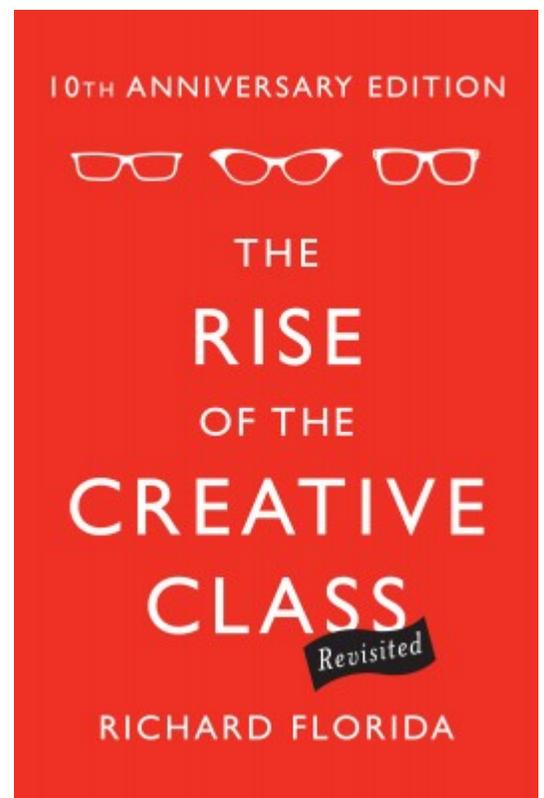
RF: I like the proliferation of websites... like your own, [Next American City](#), [Planetizen](#), [The Atlantic Cities](#) (that I've been involved with). I think increasingly we're going to move to a digital world, so I think it's wonderful that there's such a range of resources available. They have a [listing now at Planetizen of the websites that they like](#). In terms of books, I don't know if I'd recommend my own, I tend not to. I would encourage people to go back and read Jane Jacobs. I would read three starting with *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* progressing on to *The Economy of Cities* and *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*. Jane, although she wasn't a traditional scholar (that's what made her work great), was much

more intuitive. She wrote about what made sense and was much more an observer of cities and what made her work great is that she used her eyes and not a computer program to understand cities. I would start with Jane Jacobs and I think that would be the best place to start. I also think that the best way to learn about cities is to walk around them. Not using your iPhone or your smartphone as a map, but just walk around or bicycle around. I think when David Byrne wrote the [piece in the New York Times](#) about how he on his bike could see a city from a different way. I think the best way to learn about cities is just to become immersed in them and to live in them. Maybe the reason I like to live in different cities myself is because you can't really get a feel of the city as a tourist but if you live in a city over time, over several years you can get a sense of it and how it grows and develops... its ecology. Those are the things that I would look at.

Josh: Can you give us a plug for your new book? Perhaps tell our readers a little bit about what you did and what you are offering.

RF: The book that's just out now is the 10th anniversary edition of *The Rise of the Creative Class*. It's called [The Rise of the Creative Class Revisited](#) and in a way it really is a synthesis of everything I know about cities and urban areas and the economic and geographic transformation that we are living through. It not only updates *The Rise of the Creative Class* and provides all new statistics, and rankings, and parsings of cities, but it also takes the wide variety of research that I've done in my other books (*Who's Your City*, *The Great Reset*, *Flight of the Creative Class*) and a wide variety of my own research and research that's been done by this much broader community of urban economist and planners and geographers and tries to bring it to bear all in one place. So I think in terms of my own work, now that people ask what should they read of mine, I say go take a look at *The Rise of the Creative Class Revisited* because it brings together all of the work that I've done as well as my synthesis. It also presents some of the debate and dialog alongside the various criticisms.

When I look back on this, I think there is great consensus. One we know that people with talent and skill are important to economic growth and development... as important as or more important than firms whether we measure that with a college degree or human capital or a creative occupation. That's a pretty simple point, they're correlated at very closely. You know there's a debate, kind of chicken or egg, what comes first jobs or people but now most people believe that you not only have to have a great job market but you have to have a great quality of place and a great city with a lot to offer. There's a debate about whether art stimulates economic development or diversity or does that come after a city is rich. Really those both play a role, I think everyone is trying to make these sharp debates about who's right and who's wrong, but it's almost like urbanist suffer from the narcissism of small differences. What I'm trying to do with *The Rise of the Creative Class Revisited* and with *Atlantic Cities* is build a bigger constituency. Economist agree on the



taxes and the fiscal policy – they train one another and they talk to government officials. In the news we have business we have entertainment, we have politics and lifestyle. We have to get a conversation in this country about urbanism and cities.

I think everyone is trying to make these sharp debates about who's right and who's wrong, but it's almost like urbanist suffer from the narcissism of small differences.

When it comes down to it, most urbanist agree! We're not debating about whether cities are valuable or whether urban life is valuable or how skills manifest themselves across those cities. We're disagreeing about very small points in the bigger picture. So that's what I'm trying to do with this book is to say to all of us, let's get together, we're all part of a movement, we're all part of a clan. We're all making the case to Americans and people around the world that cities are the greatest innovation of all time, that cities play a critical role in economic development, that cities are fronts of innovation and artistic and technological advance, that building great cities and neighborhoods matter, that we have to get away from sprawl and these isolating communities that waste resources – that's the case I'm trying to make and to help build that movement and that shift in our society.

Josh: I have to say that one of the things that I've enjoyed as I work my way through the book is the way that it sticks to the bigger picture. As a planner myself, I think we need to maintain our sights on that debate rather than getting caught up in the nuance.

RF: I've tried to speak to the academics, the government professionals, and arts and cultural professionals and I think that's been one advantage of my own work is that for some reason, and I don't know why that is, maybe I just wrote this book in a more basic language, is that it was able to at least get their interest. Even if they thought some things are right and some things are wrong... it was able to provide a framework or a platform for people to think about cities that that no one since at least Jane Jacobs' work has anybody been able to quite do. I think it has helped to elevate the debate but there's way more to do there. That goes way beyond my work we have to build that are online resources that are executive training programs the types of things we are trying to do with [The Atlantic Cities](#) to promote these ideas and to develop better capacities. That's coming. We've made the shift and those are things we have to do in the future, but I think all of that will come over the course of the next couple of decades.