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Urban living: Home, sweet home

Urban guru Richard Florida chose Toronto. What's the right city for you?

By Chet Wesley



Where you choose to live is one of the most important decisions of your life. Whether you reside in Calgary or Toronto, Halifax or Nunavut, Richard Florida, and the much-anticipated Canadian edition of his bestselling book *Who's Your City?*, can help you figure out if you're in the right place at the right time to do what you do.

No stranger to city life himself, Florida — who was born in Newark, N.J., taught in Pittsburgh, Pa., and Washington, D.C., and now heads the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management — says where you live and work can have a significant impact on your success and happiness. As cities and regions around Canada and the world continue to specialize in more creative industries, such as information and communications technology in Guelph, or aerospace in Montreal, picking a place that has large clusters of people in your talent area is the way to go.

“Increasingly, the most talented and ambitious people need to live in ‘means-metros’ in order to realize their full economic potential,” says Florida. “When large numbers of entrepreneurs, financiers, engineers, designers, and other smart, creative people are constantly bumping into one another inside and outside of work, business ideas are formed, sharpened, executed, and if successful, expanded.” Today, more than one-third of all Canadian workers are employed in creative jobs that let them take home almost half of the country's salaries and wages.

So where is your special city? Well, if you want to be an engineer in Canada's petroleum industry, Calgary's probably your best bet; 63% of them live there, not to mention 40% of Canada's geologists. Want to be a graphic designer? Try Montreal, where 40% of them live and work. Want to be a musician? Consider Winnipeg. Winnipeg? That's right. Even though that city has just 2% of the Canadian population, you'll find 12% of the country's musicians living there. And, if you just don't know which place is right for your particular creative energies to expand and grow, try Canada's most “creative city” — Ottawa. Fully 43% of the capital's workforce is employed in creative jobs, which is more than in New York, London or San Francisco. In fact, Ottawa makes it to the top of three of Florida's “best city rankings” for young professionals, families and retirees. Calgary is No. 1 for young singles, something Florida says gives that city big potential when it comes to innovation and developing its creative economy.

But, what if you're ambitious yet want to remain in a smaller place, closer to home, or if you choose to get an entrepreneurial start in your own backyard? That may work just fine. “The most important thing is to pick the place that's right for you,” says Florida. “The book will give you the information and data you need to decide, but clearly, the worst thing you can do is just say, ‘Well, I'm kind of content and it's my hometown.’” Exploring other opportunities or alternatives before making that decision just to “stay put” can be crucial to a career.

When it comes to companies, Florida says the ones that can leave, or stay away from, places still run by stodgy old-boy networks are the ones that will win out in the end. “I certainly know many companies that talk about the need to move; not to reduce costs, but to become more flexible and recruit new kinds of people,” he says. “Take the Big Three automakers in the U.S. What if one of them were to move, say from Detroit to Chicago? What would that do to their ability to attract younger and more vibrant management talent?” Despite the pain a move can bring, Florida says most of the firms he's interviewed, that relocated to where they could find and attract more of the talent they needed, discovered multiple new opportunities.

Besides being a who's who of Canadian and U.S. cities, Florida's book provides a great reference for anyone looking for a sense of

place. Some will get to the end of the road knowing they've picked the right spot to live and work, while others will find it tough to make it through without feeling they have to pack their bags and head to the big city to succeed. And if you're a creative worker — someone who has a high-autonomy job and is paid to think — it sounds like a good idea to live in one of what Florida calls "mega-regions." You know, like the one that stretches from Montreal and Ottawa down to Toronto, past Waterloo and around to Buffalo? Or how about the one encompassing Vancouver, Seattle and Portland? The first, which he calls "Tor-Buff-Loo-Mon-Tawa," has 22 million people, generates half a trillion U.S. dollars in economic output, and is the 5th-largest mega-region in North America. The West Coast's "Cascadia," with nine million people and US\$260 billion in economic output, is North America's 11th-largest mega-region. (Both place in the Top 15 of the world's 40 mega-regions.)

Florida thinks it's Canada's open-mindedness, multiculturalism and solid banks that make the country attractive to diverse global talent. "With banks like Citibank, and all of the other U.S. banks in crisis, Toronto benefits from a financial stability that will attract the best world-class talent," he says. "Where U.S. banks are failing all over the place, Canada's banks are the strongest, if not the most secure, banks in the world, making Toronto one of the most viable banking centres in North America."

Other signs of the increasing attractiveness of Canada's mega-regions include the Buffalo Bills playing some regular season games in Toronto, and Microsoft's 2007 expansion into Vancouver. "Microsoft took that operation away from the Seattle complex because of restrictions on immigration in the United States, and the legacy of the Bush Administration," says Florida. "The move into Vancouver was to get access to international talent."

Will Canada's mega-regions see more companies from its U.S. spokes moving north? "It's really up to Toronto and Vancouver to ensure the country's prosperity in its two mega-regions," Florida says. "It's not a time to be humble anymore."

"Build it and they will come," they used to say back in the day when manufacturing plants would rise wherever the raw materials were, often the remotest of places. But in today's creative economy and its demand for talent on a global scale, it's more like, "Come to this creative place, and with your talent help build it."