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BUSINESS BOOK REVIEW

Who's Your City?

Hometown selection can still make or break you

by Stephen Turnbull

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Since the publication of Thomas Friedman's best-selling economics book *The World Is Flat*, readers and subsequent authors have widely accepted Friedman's main principle, namely that technology has advanced to such a degree that the world is a more level playing field than during previous eras.

The theory is that geographical limitations have all but ceased to exist, in effect, so that as long as you have access to the Internet and the tools necessary to use it, you can work from virtually anywhere. Similarly, businesses are now able to compete in markets that would have previously been closed to them.

Not so, says Richard Florida in his latest book entitled *Who's Your City? How the Creative Economy Is Making Where You Live the Most Important Decision of Your Life*.

Contrary to Friedman's flat-earth premise, Florida maintains that where you decide to live has far-reaching consequences, and as the title suggests, this decision may be the most important one that you ever make.

Richard Florida is the author of the bestseller *The Rise of the Creative Class and How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*, which was published in 2002. He is currently the director of the Martin Prosperity Institute and a professor of business and creativity at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. He's also a columnist for the *Toronto Globe and Mail*.

Florida starts his case by pointing out the two decisions most people would say are the most important and determinative decisions everyone must make when shaping one's life — specifically, what career to embark on and whom to choose to spend one's life with.

Okay, so that's pretty obvious, right? Florida, however, places one question ahead of both of those: the decision of where to live one's life. According to Florida, "(w)here we live is increasingly important to every aspect of our lives. We owe it to ourselves to think about the relationship between place and our economic future, as well as our personal happiness, in a more systematic — if different — way."

Sure, most of us would agree that the question of where to live is important. In a general way, we all want to live in a city we feel comfortable with. This is where Florida's research takes a giant step from the general way most of us would accept the importance of place in our lives.

According to Florida, "(t)he place we choose to live affects every aspect of our being. It can determine the income we earn, the people we meet, the friends we make, the partners we choose, and the options available to our children and families."

On the negative side, Florida maintains that your location is also crucial after losing a job or after a relationship breakup. The degree and speed with which you are able to pick yourself up and move forward may very well depend on whether you live in a place with plenty of job opportunities, or plenty of social opportunities, whichever the case may be.

As Florida notes, most people live in a particular place because they come from there or because a job or relationship brought them there. While these are certainly valid reasons to choose a place, given the staggering importance one's geographic location has on all other aspects of one's life, Florida implores us to take a far more analytical approach to evaluating place.

Contrary to Friedman's flat-earth principle, Florida maintains that all places are not equal. According to Florida, the earth is actually very "spiky." By spiky, Florida means that certain places have evolved to become highly concentrated in terms of economic activity and output, creativity, and energy.

Having become thus concentrated, these places tend to have a sort of gravitational pull, drawing in more economic activity, creativity and energy. Florida calls this force a "clustering force" and maintains that because of it, cities and certain regions and mega-regions drive economic growth and spread their influence over vast areas. Thus geographic location does have a broad influence on the world economic scene, despite everyone being wired together.

Who's Your City? is also a valuable read for anyone involved in local government planning and anyone seeking to better his or her community. The book provides a great deal of food for thought about issues such as what makes certain communities more livable than others, more economically viable than others, and more attractive to both current residents and people who may be considering making a move.



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