



## FEATURED STORY

# Who's Your City?: Richard Florida And The Geography Of Talent

BY: TRACY CERTO, 3/27/2008



In his new book, *Who's Your City*, Richard Florida says the creative economy is making where you live the most important decision of your life. The world is not flat but spiky, he argues, as today's key economic indicators—talent, innovation and creativity-- are concentrated in strategic areas, not spread out evenly

across the world. He brands the mega-regions in the world, including the Chicago/Pittsburgh corridor (a.k.a Chi-Pitts) which is the third largest.

Florida ranks American cities for best places to live at different stages of life. Regions, like people, have distinct personalities, according to researchers. While New York and the west coast have a concentration of those "open to experience", our region is dominated more by "conscientious" folks.

From the wealth of place to the geography of happiness, Florida spins a new way of looking at our place in the world today. Is it for real? Or as Steven Colbert joked at the end of his humorous interview, which is in the book, is he simply a "[gay, bohemian artist who just wants to sell his house?](#)"

We recently interviewed the author, who went out of his way to point out that despite its challenges, the good life can be found in southeast Michigan.

*Editor's note: Richard Florida's answers were edited for clarity and space.*

**You write that the real source of economic growth comes from the clustering and concentration of talented and productive people and that today's global economy is powered by a surprisingly small number of places. So what's to become of the rest of the world?**

Well, I'm scared, and one of the reasons I wrote this book is because I'm scared. The book is an empirical observation, the way the world is, and not the way I wish the world would be.

Look, if we believe in this mythology that the world is flat, that anyone can plug and play and compete from



anywhere, we're missing the point that economic resources, resources required for invention, are really concentrating in a way that few people, even leading urbanists, understand.

More than 50% of us live in urban regions. These 40 mega regions [around the world], with less than 20% of the population, account for about 2/3 of the world's economic output.

What the book says is either we have to figure out a way as a world --which looks like a long shot given the bandwidth of our national politicians-- to push up the valleys. Or we have to understand that, like it or not, their [people's] economic future may depend on their ability to move.



**Help me better understand the connection between living in a powerful mega-region like Chi-Pitts but in a city in that region that's in transition.**

Chicago's growth really sucked up all of the services and headquarters functions and lawyering and financial and accountancy that used to be done in the Detroit, the Pittsburghs, the Clevelands, the Akrons, the Toledos. Chicago has become, in a way, the business and financial center for the Chi-Pitts regions, and it's become extraordinarily expensive.

So, one can make quite a nice life in a Pittsburgh or in a Detroit if they find ways to connect to that Chi-Pitts mega region. The places in the mega region that are really at an advantage are places like Ann Arbor. I have long thought of Ann Arbor as one of the best buys and one of the best places to live in the United States, across the board. So, the college towns in that mega region have a particular advantage.

**In your book you map the different personality types dominant in different parts of the country.**

Every region has every personality type, some [have] high concentrations of certain personality types. Those regions [which] have had a high concentration of manufacturing; they needed very conscientious people to work in those



industries. I think that what's happened over time is that the "open to experience" people, who are the most likely to move, are the ones who have moved away.

So, what you've seen in those regions is not just the movement of skill or education.

We used to think it was highly educated people who were moving; I think what

we're now discovering in this fantastic work with Sam Gosling of the University of Texas and Jason Rentfrow from Cambridge University, is that the people most likely to move are "open to experience". The Andy Warhols of the world, the Bill Gates of the world, they're the people most likely to move, most likely to form new businesses.

I think it's one of the most interesting findings of the research I've been

involved in over the past 30 years. These are not education [factors], these are demographic factors. Underpinning the challenges facing older industrial regions is the mobility of certain personality types. Really, one of the maps that strikes me more than any other on the page is the "Open to Experience."

*Editor's note: concentrations are high in New York City and along the West Coast.*

### **How was the research done on personality types in various regions across the country?**

The data comes from Jason Rentfrow and Sam Gosling. It's a sample of 650,000 [people] on this five-factor model of personality. The five factors of personality are: extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroses and open to experience. They are basic personality types that psychologists probe for.

We're going to spend a lot of the summer really digging into this data and trying to understand better what is actually causing these populations. We really need to understand this because it's such a geographic factor, [one] that people didn't think about before, that we need to explain and really has a lot to do with how regions perform.

### **What about the theory that it's easier to affect change in a place like Detroit or or a smaller city like Ann Arbor?**

I hear this from people at the absolute tops of their careers. First of all, the pull of home should never be minimized. The fact --and you know I talk about this research and I take it with a grain of salt-- is every family member or close friend you leave behind costs you \$100,000 in psychic income. And I say, I'd be the last person to put a dollar value on friendship and family ties but if you're leaving 6, 8, 10 people behind, that's a lot of psychic income.

Second thing is --we heard this in all of our work over the past ten years for the interviews for [Rise of the Creative Class](#), locational histories, and interviews up to this book-- people want to be in a place they can affect change.

This quote that I've always loved --this young man in Providence said to me, "Rich, I was living in San Francisco. So I can take San Francisco from an 8.5 to a 9.2? When I moved back to Providence, I had a place that is a four that I could make an eight."



I think this ability to be involved, to be physically involved, to be socially involved, involved with your friends, your family, and be in a place that's easy to navigate. The problem with New York or even Washington, where I lived, is that they're not only hard to change, they're hard to navigate.

**[Glenn Meakem](#), founder of FreeMarkets (now Arriba) has said that he's a contrarian. If someone tells him he has to go to New York to make it, he'll choose to make it in Pittsburgh instead.**

I'm working with Christos Cotsakos on his new start-up, he formed E-trade which was in the valley. The new start-up's in West Palm Beach. Why? There were a lot of people looking for an exciting opportunity and it was easier to mobilize and build a community. People weren't commuting two and a half

hours each way to work. I think lots of people, lots of entrepreneurs are looking for those kinds of places.

And in Waterloo, let's take a place I know very well. Waterloo, Ontario, with a university about as good as Carnegie Mellon, more or less, in engineering, RIM, Research In Motion, the blackberry company, is not headquartered in Silicon Valley; it's headquartered in the middle of the Tor-Buff-Chester (Toronto/Buffalo/Rochester corridor) in Waterloo.



So, I think more and more it's going to be impossible to do that in the middle of a valley\*. All of these places are in major mega regions that have phenomenal universities. But you can make it happen. You don't have to be in the Silicon Valleys of the world to make this happen. You can make this happen in a Pittsburgh or a Waterloo or even a West Palm Beach.

I think one of the things that's important is that the universities play a really big role. And in Detroit if you look at my own rankings --look at the rankings for Ann Arbor and Lansing-- Detroit lags behind. The future of Greater Detroit, and this is hard for people to understand, is in Ann Arbor and Lansing.

And in that sense, Detroit may actually, on paper, have a better future with the breadth and extent of those two tremendous universities and just about anywhere else on the planet, but the leadership mind has to wrap around it and say, "Look, it's no longer going to be just a rebuilding of downtown. We have to build something really interesting and exciting around our major universities."

**So now that you were on the Colbert Report, does that preclude you from going on the Daily Show?**

We wondered that, too! We're working on that as we speak.

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*\*A "spiky" region, according to Richard Florida, is an area of concentrated activity --urban regions for example. New York is very spiky, Detroit is also spiky but not as much. A "valley" is where there's little or no impactful economic activity.*

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**Want to watch Richard Florida's interview with Stephen Colbert? Click on the video below:**



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*Tracy Certo is the Managing Editor and Publisher of [Pop City](#), Metromode's sister publication in Pittsburgh.*

Photos:

Richard Florida and The Colbert Report courtesy of [www.creativeclass.com](http://www.creativeclass.com)

U of M students at Ambrosia Cafe - Ann Arbor

U of M students on campus - Ann Arbor

**Photographs by [Marvin Shaouni](#)**

*Marvin Shaouni is the managing photographer for Metromode & [Model D](#).*