

June 25, 2010

Urban Lands of Opportunity

By RICHARD FLORIDA

WHEN I was growing up, there was a strict line between work and life. Every morning, my dad downed a bowl of cereal and a cup of coffee and drove his Chevy Impala from our home in North Arlington, N.J., to the eyeglass factory in the Ironbound section of Newark, where he worked.

Until 4:30 p.m., when he headed home, he never set foot outside of Victory Optical's premises — not to run an errand or grab lunch with friends, and certainly not to take a walk or to work out at the gym.

Over the past couple of decades, a new way of working and a new kind of workplace have evolved. It began in Silicon Valley, where companies ceded a certain degree of autonomy to knowledge workers, recognizing that too much rigidity could stifle creative output. Khakis and shirtsleeves replaced gray flannel suits. And 9 to 5 sometimes became 9 to 9 or 11 to 1 in the morning. But the time was broken up by espresso runs and bike rides, or ultimate Frisbee games during lunch.

The trend has spread to the point that our lifestyles and our work styles are becoming increasingly blurred. Though my factory-worker father might not have believed it, those people you see hunched over their laptops in coffee shops and thumbing instant messages on their BlackBerrys as they walk through the park are actually working.

This new way of work has given rise to what the sociologist Ray Oldenburg calls "[third places](#)" — the [Starbucks](#) where we go not just to drink coffee but also to send an e-mail; the hotel lobby where we take a meeting; or the local library where we write a report, edit a document or revise a business plan.

Increasingly, places are supplanting plants — corporate headquarters and factories — as the principal social and economic organizing units of our time. There are several reasons for this.

People used to follow the jobs; they moved where the company sent them. But today, people often pick a place to live first and then look for work. Today, it may be where we live, rather than who's employing us at the moment, that attaches us to our work and careers.

There used to be a saying in Silicon Valley that you could change jobs without having to change your parking lot. Urban workers today simply switch subway stops or take a

different bike path when they get a new job. Especially in tough times, it makes more sense to choose a big city, with its thick labor markets and greater economic opportunities, over a single company.

Certain cities offer specialized career opportunities: Silicon Valley is the place to be if you're a techie, Los Angeles if you're an aspiring actor or director, Nashville for music. Other cities are more diverse and offer a wide range of vocations to try out.

One young man told me he moved to Washington after college because he wanted to explore as many of his interests as he could before committing himself to just one. In Washington, he could work for a research organization or a journal, a nonprofit or an N.G.O., or perhaps for the State Department. Or he could go to graduate school.

As it happened, this man's indie rock band took off. Washington's club scene, filled with young people with disposable income, provided the perfect launching pad for a career in music.

Despite the hits that Wall Street and the news media have taken, New York remains the center of a diverse and entrepreneurial economy. And regional hubs like Chicago have been sucking up a huge share of the talent and opportunities that were once dispersed throughout surrounding cities and towns.

The metabolic rate of living organisms tends to slow as they increase in size. But cities can achieve a faster rate of "urban metabolism" as they grow, leading to more innovation, economic growth and improved living standards.

Clearly, major cities have a great advantage as this new way of working takes hold. So what can smaller cities and towns do to retain their viability?

All successful revitalization efforts focus on upgrading existing local assets — developing better ties among colleges, universities and communities, strengthening business districts, upgrading parks and open spaces, preserving and reusing old buildings and supporting local art and music.

SUCH communities are rich in resources for working, learning and simply enjoying life. They are places where people can prosper in their careers while achieving higher levels of well-being.

Mass migration from farms to urban centers generated new prosperity after the Long Depression of 1873-79. The expanding suburbs underpinned the great economic boom of the 1950s and 60s. We are now at the cusp of another such far-reaching movement — with the magnetic pull of urban centers strengthening our economy and leading to a more seamless blending of work and life.

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