How Cities Renew

words Richard Florida
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RECENTLY my wife and I took a flight from Italy to Dubai to give the keynote address at the Global City Forum in Abu Dhabi. Upon arriving at Dubai International Airport, I was not only struck by the flight boards which displayed connectivity from every major part of the world but also by the multiculturalism and diversity of the UAE’s people. We were greeted by a young Malaysian woman and Indonesian escorts who lead us seamlessly through customs. My wife and I were pleased when we stepped outside the curb at 1 am to find a sea of drivers waiting to take us to Abu Dhabi. My wife, who is Jordanian, was prepared to speak Arabic to navigate us to our destination, but even the driver who was Pakistani spoke perfect English.

As we sped down the highway I was amazed by the cleanliness of the city – especially compared to many highways which are littered with debris. During the two hour drive, it was hard not to notice several cranes of new development in the desert sky against the backdrop of cultural old-world mosques. When we pulled down Corniche Road, we took in the beautifully manicured landscape of palm trees and the beach.

After my speech at the Palace for the Global City Forum, we met with several city leaders, who talked about their future regional development plans. I was pleased to learn about their goals to grow and connect the region, while preserving its authentic cultural amenities and heritage, and protect their natural and territorial assets with beaches, parks and gardens.

Welcome to the age of the authentic. There is a global competition to attract and retain the best and brightest. To do so, cities must refine our ideas about quality of life.

What matters now more than ever, is quality of place. I define it as the intersection of three key elements of our cities: what’s there (the natural and built environments); who’s there (the people); and what’s going on (what people are doing, our relationship with the natural and built environments).

The Key factor today revolves around the ability of places to attract talent and unleash it in a broad cross-section of the population. An energized city is the place where creative, entrepreneurial, and forward-thinking people from every walk of life, every class, every lifestyle want to be. And people with abundant creative energy don’t want to be safely tucked away somewhere. They want accidents to happen, look for the rough edges and seek the authentic. As urbanist Jane Jacobs said, new ideas really do require old buildings.

Some of my very own critics like to say I am an advocate for urban areas populated solely by “yuppies, sophitos, trendoids and communities with alternative, liberal lifestyles.” But that misses a crucial part of the equation.

Quality of place is not just about consuming. Yes, nice apartments help, as do good cafes, souks and soccer in the park. But the real energy of a place comes from the edges, the clashes that happen when ethnic neighborhoods rub up against hipster quarters, where different “ghettos” impinge upon “strollivers.” It’s the real, authentic experiences and the jagged edges between neighborhoods.
This is what New York did extremely well in the past, but now that's threatened by escalating rents and a malled-over Manhattan. London, too, as rents rise into the stratosphere - where is the next Hoxton Square going to be? Like Jacobs once told me, "When a place gets boring, even the rich people leave."

The conventional stuff still matters: a place needs to be clean and safe and have good schools and pipes that work. It needs to have economic opportunity, especially since so many of us are no longer tied to one job for life. A good mayor helps, as do business and cultural communities that care and invest. Yes, the old is new again, but only if it is really new.

The new quality of place adds two factors to the mix - openness to diversity and the aesthetic dimension. It's the urban equivalent of Maslow's old hierarchy of needs. People need to feel safe and secure. We need to have opportunity, and we need leaders that get it and resonate. But today, more than ever, we need to feel welcome and be able to self-express. The energy of the city comes from this capacity to express, to think and act outside the norm, to be ourselves, to forge new identities, to create. A closed city is a dead city. Open cities thrive.

The aesthetic dimension - the beauty of a place - is critical. The cities with the deepest and truest hold on people have long been those with a strong aesthetic dimension. Think of the cosmopolitan charm of Amsterdam, the history found around every corner in Berlin or Vienna. The rose gardens of Portland, the minarets of Istanbul and the crumbling of mosaiued pavements of Lisbon. This is what really draws people in - it is what draws residents in. Not just tourists.

If this all sounds emotional, well it is. In an economy where talent comes in all shapes, sizes and ethnicities, where the best places in their fields have to compete for the best talent in the world, the only way to retain talent is to offer the kind of place that provides emotional attachment.

In today's world, the ranks of global nomads get to pick their place. And we are tired of the smooth, generic, flattened-out worlds, where cars, foods and fashions are the same in whatever blandened global city you may be in. They Blanch when another politician or pop star becomes the new face of another luxury brand. They're over it. They want real places - the unique and authentic.

Article printed with the permission of Richard Florida, who is the founder of Creative Class Group and author of several national and international best-sellers including 'Who's Your City?' and 'Rise of the Creative Class'. He is also Director of the Martin Prosperity Institute and Professor of Business and Creativity at the Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto.