

## Jane Jacobs-style density is best for cities, Florida says

Ten years after publishing of *The Rise of the Creative Class*, the prominent city-booster says high-rises are “vertical suburbs” and we need “urban environments that stir the spirit.”

architecture community development economy

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### Better! Cities & Towns

Like a preacher in an urban-revival tent, Richard Florida roused the gathering at last week’s 20th Congress for the New Urbanism in West Palm Beach, Florida. The event took place on the 10th anniversary of publication of *The Rise of the Creative Class*, the book that made him a star among city admirers.

“Isn’t it interesting that the world has come to us?” he asked the gathering of 1,100 urbanists. “Something has changed to make this part of the great challenges of our time. ... I thought I was out in the wilderness, but it’s happening everywhere.”

Florida first gained a wide audience by talking about urban revival and the “creative class” in the late 1990s. At the time, he encountered considerable skepticism. “People said that the dot.com bust would end the revitalization of cities,” he said. “Then they said the Trade Center disaster would do it. Then the economic collapse. The power of urbanism has just accumulated.”

That’s despite technology such as highways, jet planes, and social media which, some believed, would make place irrelevant. “Not so fast,” he said. “Just recently we went over 50 percent of the world’s people living in cities. We’ll go up to 60 percent and 70 percent. We are becoming a much more urban world that anyone had ever imagined.”

What’s bringing a focus on urbanism back, he said, is that “our economy has gone through one of the greatest transformations in human history.” Land, labor, and capital are no longer the primary factors in growth. Peter Drucker, the management guru, in the late 1960s described “the knowledge economy,” he said. Then Jane Jacobs explained that wealth does not come from corporations — it comes from cities. (Edward Glaeser expanded on that theme in his 2011 book, *Triumph of the City*.)

Florida believes that creativity is the real source of growth. He has been stung by charges of elitism — that he’s a mouthpiece for latté-sipping, gentrifying yuppies. That’s not what he is saying at all, he explained. His father worked in a Newark factory for five decades, sacrificing to support his family and putting his son through school. The creativity of workers — as opposed to machines and capital — made the factory work, Florida argued. “Every single human being is creative,” he said. “Stoking the creativity within every person is [the task of cities].”

Florida added a number of provocative points.

- Because the dialog has shifted, new urbanists have to change their approach. “Our role has changed. We are not revolutionaries and pioneers. We have to become teachers.” If young people or academics say something about cities that sounds false, “give them a big hug, tell them how important what their work is, but take them aside and say ‘let’s go for a walk and see what the city is all about.’”

Florida recalled that as a young academic at Carnegie Mellon, he was mentored by David Lewis, Don Carter, and Ray Gindroz — principals of the firm Urban Design Associates in Pittsburgh — who pointed out details and “explained how cities work.” Later he met Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, John Norquist, and other urbanists. “You have really shaped my thinking,” he said.

- One of the false statements is that density and skyscrapers are the key ingredients to urban vitality and innovation. “This rush to density, this idea that density creates economic growth,” is wrong, he said. “It’s the creation of real, walkable urban environments that stir the human spirit. Skyscraper communities are vertical suburbs, where it is lonely at the top. The kind of density we want is a ‘Jane Jacobs density.’”

- The urban/suburban debate is likewise false, he said. “Great communities and great neighborhoods pretty much look the same,” he said. They are human-scale, include a mix of uses, and are close to transit. “These are the kind of things that people desire, and it is not just in the urban core that you find them,” he said.

- The benefit of cities is “not just about the creation of jobs and economic growth,” he said. “It’s about finding true purpose and meaning in life.” Florida cited the *Soul of the Community* study, released in 2011 by the Knight Foundation. Two qualities drive emotional attachment to a place, he explained.

1) **Openness to diversity.** “The more different groups are valued, the higher the collective well-being,” he said.

2) **The quality of the place itself** is the single most important factor in people’s fulfillment. There are four parts to this: the degree to which a community: values its history; is walkable and mixed-use; values arts, both street art and high art; and integrates the built and natural environment.

- Economists who argue that high-speed rail fails a cost-benefit analysis are wrong, he argued. “There are two ways that we can accelerate our mobility,” he said. “One is by walkability — moving closer together. The other is by improving transit in corridors.” Better mobility will not come from the “gridlocked” highways, or from jet planes, which take too long due to security, boarding, and delays. Florida’s governor “needs his head examined,” he said. “Turning back the high-speed rail funds? What kind of a bone-headed move was that?”

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