



Urbanist Richard Florida talks to Kelvin Browne at the MaRS Centre in Toronto. Below: Museum consultant Gail Lord in her Toronto condominium.

PROPHETS OF THE CITY

Richard Florida and Gail Lord explain why cities, and their cultural institutions, are the 21st century's engines of prosperity.

By Kelvin Browne
Photography by Raina and Wilson



'A BOLD NEW MUSEUM BUILDING ENCOURAGES BOLD URBAN DEVELOPMENT. IT RAISES THE BAR OF DESIGN.'

There's a renewed appreciation of the importance of cities. It's not only about the quality of life they support, but also how they can be economic drivers in an age when ideas are the most valuable commodity and knowledge workers are crucial to growth.

When cities prosper, real estate values escalate. In this decade, the greatest gains are found downtown. Be it Manhattan, central London, or midtown Toronto, the trend of the dwindling core has been reversed and, with increasing energy costs, the appeal of the suburbs is becoming even more remote. The most visible sign of the increasing importance of cities, especially in North America, is the resurgence in building downtown—not only commercial building and residential towers, but also cultural, educational, and scientific institutions.

What has changed? To understand the “new city,” there are two aspects that are the most significant: the people that now choose to live there and the cultural and other institutions that attract them.

Author and University of Toronto professor Richard Florida is well known for his books *The Rise of the Creative Class* and *The Flight of the Creative Class*. One of the world's leading public intellectuals on economic competitiveness, demographic trends, and cultural innovation, Florida describes in these landmark books a society where the creative ethos is increasingly dominant. More of the most productive workers are living much as artists have lived. Their values and tastes, personal relationships, and choices of where to live are increasingly what used to be associated with artists.

This is the workforce that creates for a living and, according to Florida, represents about 40 per cent of the population. This “creative class” is found in a variety of fields, from engineering to theatre, from biotech to education, from architecture to small business. They are inevitably the best-educated and best-paid workers. Already, their choices have had a huge economic impact. In the future, it is they who will determine how the workplace is organized, which companies will prosper or go bankrupt, and, most importantly, which cities will thrive or wither.

How do they determine which cities prosper? In his most recent book, *Who's Your City? How the Creative Economy Is Making Where to Live the Most Important Decision of Your Life*, Florida makes the case that despite communication technology, where you live really matters. The city you choose to live in has moved to the top of the list of factors with the ability to influence your life, perhaps ahead of what career you choose and whom you marry.

In a bright meeting room at the MaRS Centre offices in Toronto, Florida explains that being creative requires the support of a real community. You can extend your community on-line, but you don't get synergy that way. For instance, a virtual community can't generate the same kind of chance encounters that lead to commercial relationships or that nurture business relationships into friendships.

“Today's key economic factors—talent, innovation, and creativity—are not distributed evenly across the global economy,” says Florida. “They concentrate in specific locations. In today's creative economy, the real source of economic

growth comes from the clustering and concentration of talented and productive people.” In other words, if you want to succeed, live in the city where the best and brightest in your field do.

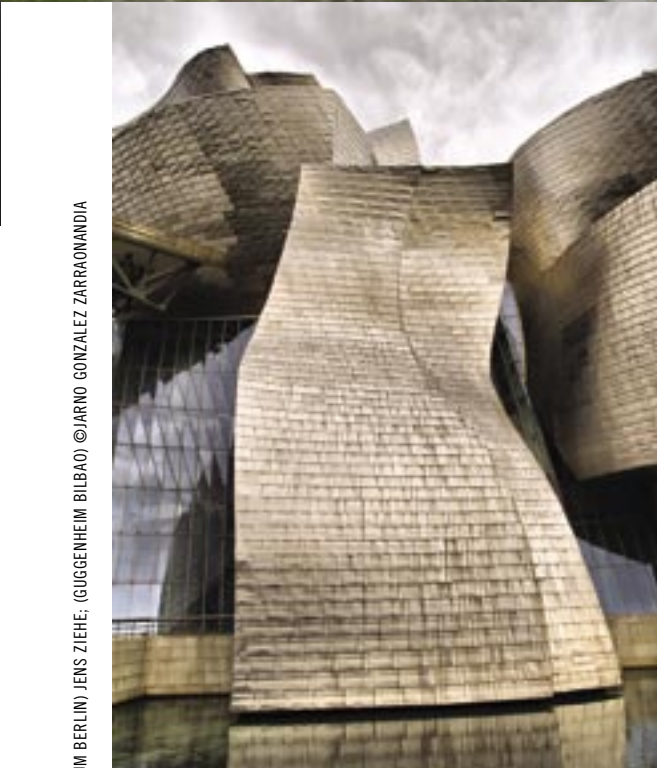
Florida also points out that career may not be your priority. You might have lifestyle imperatives that are more important. Therefore, in *Who's Your City?* he ranks cities in different categories of interest, as well as subdivides them into large, mid-sized, and small regions. For instance, for single people aged 20 to 29, the top three locations in the large U.S. regions are San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Boston. In mid-sized regions, it's Madison, Wis., Worcester, Md., and Bridgeport, Conn. In small regions, singles should head for Boulder, Colo., Santa Barbara, Calif., and Trenton, N.J.

The responsibility of cities is to make sure they're attractive to the kind of people they want as residents. It's not a passive thing; it's not beyond a city's control. How you design your city, and the institutions you support, makes a big difference in who would want to live there and, in turn, how these residents then further influence the course of urban development.

In terms of attracting and motivating creative people who will build a dynamic city (and country), few things today are more valued than high-profile, innovative cultural institutions. They are now not merely symbols of success and civic sophistication, as they were assumed to be in the 20th century, but are in fact the reasons for urban vitality in the 21st century. The best cities, the ones where people want to live, are those cities with the most dynamic cultural institutions.

“It is increasingly acknowledged that the museum has become an engine of urban redesign,” said Gail Lord, president of Toronto-based Lord Cultural Resources (LCR), in a recent *Globe and Mail* article. “As a museum planner who has worked with hundreds of museums worldwide, I can confirm that the growth in museums is staggering, and that many are built with at least the partial purpose of contributing to the redevelopment of a city or a particular area of a city.”

Over the past 25 years, LCR has been involved in major international building and expansion projects. The company counselled the Basque city of Bilbao to focus on its Spanish heritage. It created the concept and designed the facilities for the National September 11 Memorial & Museum, which is



Clockwise from top left: Beijing National Olympic Stadium (Bird's Nest); London Eye; Jüdisches Museum Berlin; Guggenheim Bilbao.

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(BEIJING NATIONAL OLYMPIC STADIUM) SUNXUEJUN; (LONDON EYE) BENSON HE; (JÜDISCHES MUSEUM BERLIN) JENS ZIEHE; (GUGGENHEIM BILBAO) © ARNO GONZALEZ ZARRAONANDIA

being built on the site of the former World Trade Center. LCR has also written operating and program plans and done research for the Louvre, the Tate Modern, the Smithsonian, and many other prominent cultural shrines in the world.

Every city wants to build a Bilbao-like museum and transform itself into an international cultural destination and receive all the economic benefits associated with such a transformation. Why this fixation on cultural institutions? “The best cultural institutions create knowledge and they're also the means to disperse it to a wide public,” explains Lord, sitting in the comfortable modern living room of her Toronto condominium. “Research centres, hospitals, [and] most aspects of universities are mostly closed to the public. Museums and galleries are not, [and] they can have an immediate impact on a broad range of people. Because of this, they can influence more people and shape a city.” Lord also points out that museums, unlike other institutions, are natural destinations for cultural tourists. These are typically well-educated and affluent visitors who, in addition to spending money in a city or country, will subsequently promote a city and build its reputation when they return home.

“Cultural institutions—certainly, the example of Bilbao is often

mentioned—have used bold architecture to establish their identities,” Lord continues. “Cities look to cultural institutions to set a tone, to innovate with their architecture.” A bold new museum building encourages more bold urban development. It raises the bar of design, that is, if it's good.

Where do cultural institutions have the most impact on the life of a city? “London and New York, of course,” says Lord. “Despite the high costs of living in these cities, [they are] where artists and intellectuals want to live. These are centres of innovation. There is a high quality of life that has much to do with the culture institutions at the heart of these cities.”

But Lord points out that it's not just the major world centres that are now putting cultural institutions at their core and where culture is an assumed to be a necessity for growth. She gives several examples of mid-sized cities, such as Manchester, where new cultural institutions have been key to revitalization. “It's clear [that] cultural institutions are essential for building cities of all sizes.”

Creative people in creative surroundings—this is what the best and brightest want in a city today. Transit, parks, and good maintenance are important, but our need for connection, a.k.a. culture, is the imperative ingredient of the city of tomorrow. •