The trouble with the Creative Class

Kate Shaw

You've probably come across the 'uber-cool' Richard Florida. American economics professor, and his 'creative class' thesis by now frequents our governments all over the world falling over themselves to pay his minimum US $10,000 speaking fee. Here's an extract from his visit to Melbourne in December 2004:

Professor Florida: I think it's obvious what you have done here...it's stunning.

Treasurer John Brumby: I think there's a lot of truth in his thesis. Melbourne itself...is proof of it.

That's what they want to hear. What's the thesis? In short, that economic growth occurs in cities that are tolerant, diverse and open to creativity because that's where creative people want to live, and that companies follow the creative people, not the other way round. So instead of offering tax breaks and infrastructure to big companies, cities wanting to be economically successful must make themselves attractive to what Florida calls the 'creative class'. His book, The Rise of the Creative Class, has been a bestseller since 2002, and has come in for almost as much stick as it has adulation. The critics have the same grounds as the acclaim: Florida's solution offers a quick fix, not too much government investment, attractive to small business communities and leftist liberals alike, what one academic calls 'just add culture and stir' (Gibson 2004).

The thesis is initially appealing. Residents, businesses and tourists want a vibrant city, and there is certainly economic benefit in such a scenario. With an almost Keynesian approach Florida advocates public investment in 'soft' infrastructure such as heritage restorations, galleries, street cafes, bike paths, small creative initiatives and local music scenes. And there's nothing wrong with that. It's his reasoning, and what he leaves out, that gets him into trouble.

Here's a summary of Florida's case. The 'creative class' consists of some 30 per cent of all employed people in the US, second only to the 'service class' which has 45 per cent. The working class only makes up 25 per cent of the workforce. The creative class includes a core of people in 'science and engineering, architecture and design, education, arts, music and entertainment'. These are the 'creative professionals in business and finance, law, health care and related fields' (2002:8). That is, pretty well anyone on a high white-collar salary. Of course this class earns way more than the other two put together, and this is the class cities want...

The presence of a creative class is one of four equal indicators of an economically successful city. The others are: innovation (patents per capita), high-tech industry (number of firms), and diversity (measured by Florida's 'gay index'). The creative class brings all the above motivations and high-tech, attracted by the city's diversity. Taken together, these indicators aggregate into a 'creativity index', and cities score high on this index are exemplars known as 'creative centres' (San Francisco, Austin Texas, Atlanta, etc). The working class and service class centres also exist (Memphis, New Orleans, Detroit) and Florida notes a new geographic sorting along class lines, no longer within but between cities.

He ranks cities throughout the world on the creativity index, and compares this ranking to other measures including a 'melting pot index' (number of foreign-born residents), a 'bohemian index' (writers, musicians, artists, etc), a 'coolness index' (city nightlife), a 'talent index' (percentage of population with a bachelor degree or above) and so on, in various permutations. High levels of innovation and high-tech industry correlate with locations of the creative class and talent. High-tech is directly proportional to the melting pot and gay indices. Innovation correlates with the bohemian index. Florida's point is to show not that high-tech workers are foreign born or gay, but that the presence of large immigrant and gay communities signifies a place that is open and tolerant, and that "these qualities are important to high-tech workers and Creative Class people in general" (p.238).

To reinforce the point, Florida shows that working class regions are low in economic growth and that correlations between the talent index and working class centres are 'negative and highly significant' (leading him to suggest that "Working Class regions possess among the lowest levels of human capital") (p.252). There is a negative correlation between high-tech firms and percentage of African-Americans (Florida:2004:10) and 'other nonwhites' (p.262). He observes that "the Creative Economy does little to ameliorate the traditional divide between the white and nonwhite segments of the population. It may even make it worse" (p.263). He stops short of declaring poor, black areas low in levels of human capital, but moves briskly on.

The correlations mount to an argument that "diversity and creativity work together to power innovation and economic growth" (p.262). Cities wanting economic success must therefore attract the creatives, and Florida is here to tell them how. The creative class wants lifestyle (music, art, tech, scenes and nightlife), social interaction (coffee shops, bookstores and cafes), diversity "different ethnic groups and races, different ages, different sexual orientations and alternative appearances such as significant body piercing or tattoos" (p.266). Authenticity (historic buildings, established neighbourhoods, unique music scenes, "urban grit alongside renovated buildings ... long-time neighbourhood characters and yuppies, fashion models on how best to build local 'cultural capital', not just engaged those governments, if it proposed anything radical.

But as often is the case with pop theory, there is also something in it. No-one wants to live in an uncool city, and investment in social infrastructure does increase social equity. Support of local cultural scenes via funding, cultural policy and showcasing of the city is a way into the heart of the creative class. Melbourne itself...is proof of it. Support of local cultural scenes via funding, cultural policy and showcasing of the city is a way into the heart of the creative class.

The live music scene remains under pressure from the same residential development standards that contribute to the vibrancy of the CBD. Its persistence in Melbourne is despite, not because of, anything any government has done. Venue closures have slowed recently mainly because of the slump in the inner-city property market, but they will resume. The State Government's commitment to a creative city has yet to be tested.

Just as artists and musicians need cheap space if they are not to become the buking "after-dinner entertainment" (Gibson 2004), the "bag ladies" and working and services classes need somewhere decent to live if they are not to be consigned to long journeys into town on inadequate public transport to enrich the creative class's cultural experience. This, Florida reveals, appears beyond city government's reach.

The rise of Florida's exemplars (Port Phillip's creative class, paper to the City of Melbourne Docklands, the "bag ladies" and working and services classes need somewhere decent to live if they are not to be consigned to long journeys into town on inadequate public transport to enrich the creative class's cultural experience. This, Florida reveals, appears beyond city government's reach.

Dr Kate Shaw is a Research Fellow in the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning at the University of Melbourne.

The Creative Cities – Cultural Tourism Melbourne Conversation series will be held on Monday, 17 February at the BMW Edge. Speakers in the first session from 6 – 8pm on Monday include Kate Shaw and Marcus Spiller.

References


Gibson, Lisanne (2004) Port Philip's creative class, paper to the City of Port Philip's second gentrification forum: Rereating urban culture, March.


Trosby, David and Hollister, Virginia (2003) Don't give up your day job: An economic study of professional artists in Australia, Australia Council for the Arts, Australia.