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## A Review by Mike Klassen of The Rise of the Creative Class, by Richard Florida

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## **A Review by Mike Klassen of *The Rise of the Creative Class*, by Richard Florida**

Part of the journal section "Reviews and Responses"

Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.

Reviewed by Mike Klassen

### **"Bringing Bohemians to Iowa"**

Visits to most tiny towns in the U.S. Midwest are for me, a Kansas boy raised in a town of fewer than 300 souls, depressing. Empty streets and vacant retail spaces signify a local economy that has hit the wall - a far cry from the vibrant commercial district of my boyhood, which included our own family-owned mercantile. But then I visited Fairfield, Iowa. Here, I found an old familiar small town "buzz," plied by ethnic restaurants, art galleries, assorted retail venues, and an ethnically diverse population that rivals most U.S. cities - in short, a town with imagination. I wondered: after all the money Iowa has poured into small town economic development to no avail, could the answer lie in its own backyard?

Fairfield, Iowa is a town that "gets it!" That's what Richard Florida, Distinguished Professor of Regional Economic Development in the Heinz School of Public Policy and Management at Carnegie Mellon University would undoubtedly say. And in his book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, he explains why.

The nation's most creative cities and towns have three things in common - talent, technology, and tolerance - the "3-T's." While Florida maintains that all three must exist before the creativity begins, his examples of cities that have failed to be creative predominantly include places that have dropped the ball when it comes to tolerance. Pointing to his own place of residence, Pittsburgh, Dr. Florida shows how a well-known city can be world-class in two of the three components (namely, talent and technology) but remain a place that the world's most creative people avoid. Ask most Carnegie Mellon grads where they want to live, says Professor Florida, and you'll get the same answer: anywhere but Pittsburgh. According to Florida, the problem stems from Pittsburgh's lack of tolerance. The power class made up of Pittsburgh's old steel families it seems, prefers to keep things the way they have been, which means that the nation's creative class - with its body piercings, tattoos, loud music, Eastern religions, health foods, holistic medicines, technological talents, and innovative spirit - are not welcome.

Thus Professor Florida would have the reader believe that Fairfield, Iowa has something Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania does not, as do Iowa City, Des Moines, and Cedar Rapids - all of which

rank above Pittsburgh as some of America's most creative places, according to Florida's research. In fact, when it comes to the 3-T's, Iowa City and Des Moines outpace three of its Midwest city cousins: Chicago, Kansas City, and Milwaukee. My own informal analysis of Florida's data found that within a 300 mile radius of Cedar Falls, (where I live), six places consistently turned up as some of the most creative cities in the nation: Madison, Iowa City, Cedar Rapids, Des Moines, Kansas City, and Chicago.

So what ultimately makes a 3-T city? Florida believes it is ultimately the people it attracts. Here, Florida makes his most significant observation when he states that creative people move to a particular place not because of a job or salary, but because of its citizens. What draws creative people to certain places is the presence of other creative people. Seattle stands for Jimi Hendrix, Nirvana, and Pearl Jam, but also Starbucks, Microsoft, and Amazon. Austin is the home of Sandra Bullock, Lance Armstrong, Willie Nelson, and the Sixth Street music scene, as well as Michael Dell. The same dynamic is timeless and worldwide, whether it be 4th century AD Athens, Paris in the 1930's, or today's Dublin, Ireland - home of Van Morrison, U2 and the "Irish Technology Miracle." Creativity follows creativity, regardless of the forms it takes. And for that to happen, tolerance is essential. In fact, one may conclude from Florida's analysis that tolerance is the key ingredient of a creative city. Yet, common sense suggests that it takes more than espresso bars, tattoo parlors, and foreign film theaters to change a city. Last I looked, America's "coffee shop radicals" had yet to change much of anything beyond the style of their reading glasses or the tilt of their berets.

Aside from this bow to politically correct ideology, the fundamental shortcoming of Florida's analysis resides not so much in what it says than what it fails to say. Specifically, how does a city or town attract creative people? This essential question is not satisfactorily answered. Don't misunderstand - this is more than an armchair analysis and the author's charts and figures will warm the hearts of most academics. So why doesn't Florida take the reader to the logical and perhaps most useful applications? How can the reader but not ultimately conclude that indeed, there is a "chemistry," some magic that just happens to change a sleepy, working class Seattle into one of the world's hippest places? *The Rise of the Creative Class* is a great resource for business professors hoping to create interesting Powerpoint presentations, but it will likely leave members of your town's Zoning and Planning Commission asking for more.

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