

***The New Urban Crisis*, Richard Florida, book review  
Planning Perspectives**

**Sidra Ahmed, Department of Geography, UCL** <sidra.ahmed.17@ucl.ac.uk>

**Andrew Harris, Department of Geography, UCL** <andrew.harris@ucl.ac.uk>

**Jordan Rowe, UCL Urban Laboratory** <jordan.rowe@ucl.ac.uk>

**Olivia Smith, Department of Geography, UCL** <o.smith.17@ucl.ac.uk>

Richard Florida has proved a lightning-rod for critique within urban studies since the publication of his widely influential book *The Rise of the Creative Class* in 2002. His seductive message spelling out possibilities for urban economic development through a concoction of bike-lanes, coffee-shops, bohemians and technologists has received many unfavourable responses from fellow urbanists. Criticisms raised have ranged from points around the validity of his modelling and class categories (e.g. Krätke, 2011) to trenchant arguments around his complicity in forms of neoliberal urbanism and gentrification (e.g. Peck, 2005). Although never engaging directly with this commentary, in his new book Florida recognizes how ‘this criticism provoked my thinking in ways I could never have anticipated’ (xxii). By exploring growing inequality within and between cities, Florida seeks to offer a *mea culpa* around the overly optimistic notion that the creative class could conjure more inclusive and sustainable forms of contemporary urbanism. The result throws up plenty of pertinent issues not fully acknowledged previously by Florida: around the growing power of ‘superstar’ cities such as London in a ‘winner-take-all urbanism’; on the increasing role of rentiers and the use of property as a reserve currency; and crucially on how an all-consuming focus on the advantages of a ‘creative class’ misses the worsening plight of urban working classes. Given Florida’s impressive reach as an urban intellectual beyond the usual insular academic channels, this is certainly a welcome turn. But to what extent has Florida changed his spots in recognizing more of the crisis-bound limits to the ‘creative city’ model? To what extent has his writing and research strategy modified in the process? And to what extent does his coverage recognize a wider world of urban creativity?

In inventing the term “the New Urban Crisis”, Florida seeks to bring together five urban dimensions (or four as he decides later on): the inequality between London and the rest of the UK; London’s plutocratisation; the disappearing middle class; the suburban crisis; and the developing world’s urbanisation crisis. *The New Urban Crisis* is a catchy term that allows Florida to package and claim ownership of these dimensions. The final and peripheral pillar of “the New Urban Crisis”, however, has a weak foundation that does not allow Florida to fully explore the issue. Rapid urbanisation in the developing world which has not been accompanied by economic growth and a rise in living standards but rather in over 800 million people living in poverty and informal settlements is Florida’s main point of concern. Whilst he makes this issue clear with his regional data of Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and Asia, the reader is not presented with data and issues at a specific city scale. Understandably, Florida’s expertise lies in North America and Europe, but he nevertheless takes a big and simplified leap to the ‘developing world’. In seeking to globalise his “New Urban Crisis”, Florida falls short in

communicating to the reader to look beyond urban informality in the developing world as a problem. His chapter on this dimension would have benefitted from considering existing and extensive urban research on how planners must actually accommodate for urban informality, it is a way of urban development in the Global South (e.g. Roy, 2009). Reflecting on this in the final chapter, Florida makes a concerted effort to propose solutions in the context of North America and Europe. When it comes to recommending the way forward for the Global South, he proposes a rather utopian solution of the West focusing on city building through their foreign and international development policies whilst neglecting to consider and suggest what the urban planning and governance systems in the developing world could do for themselves too.

Florida mainly relies on examples from New York City, alongside comparison with London to illustrate his thinking behind *The New Urban Crisis*. Writing this review as four individuals, living, breathing and studying London, the book's lens on the city is of particular interest. London, the effervescent 'superstar' city is used as a reference point to mark inequality with the rest of the UK, and the deep plutocratisation of the urban landscape. Having read this book across the breadth of the city, from coffee shops in Dalston, to train stations in King's Cross it is hard not to reflect on where London really sits in Florida's writing. Of course, what he and his team of Toronto city consultants observe is true, London is a divided city. Yet, there is so much more in the space between affluent areas Florida labels as "primarily creative class" and poorer neighbourhoods termed as "primarily service class". Although his packaging of 'superstar' cities and the different spaces within them is helpful in understanding his 'Urban Crisis', it misses much of the everyday richness and complexity of London. On the cover of the US version of the book, buildings from the New York skyline circle 'The New Urban Crisis', as though the theme is at the heart of the city. On the front of the UK copy, the Shard and Canary Wharf buildings are juxtaposed with concrete flat blocks down the right hand side of the page, separate from the book title. It is hard not to question at times whether London's presence in Florida's writing, is above all a clever marketing rouse. Though this work is heavily reliant on *both* London and New York based examples, London's story seems to be somewhat of an afterthought.

As an examination of the wider trends facing the superstar cities of the global north, the book offers a fair summary. The agenda is correct, but one frustration we found was a tendency for repetition and over-simplification in areas, alongside jarring subheadings such as 'Turn Low-Wage Service Jobs into Middle-Class Work'. Moreover, the over-reliance on quantitative data – graphs and tables are sprinkled liberally throughout the book– feels like a missed opportunity for the author to grapple with on-the-ground social contexts, beyond his narrow anecdotes of growing up in and around Newark, or speaking to black cab drivers on his way from an airport. Yet, for all this, Florida remains an effective communicator, and *The New Urban Crisis* is written with the same biographical and conversational tone of his earlier work. As the convenor and students of a Creative Cities module on UCL's MSc Urban Studies course, we can identify richer material that covers many of the points raised here by Florida (e.g. Mould, 2015; Colomb, 2012), but as a body of work pitching itself as a defining analysis of our current urban situation, and positioned for wide consumption outside of academic circles, it does a reasonable job of tying together the central elements and contradictions of contemporary

neoliberal governance. Unlike toolkit-era Florida, where easy fixes could be identified to produce dynamic urban spaces, *The New Urban Crisis* sits as a more rounded product, one which may leave the policymaker with a clearer understanding of how creative city policies affect a host of city actors outside of the 'creative class'.

Krätke, S., 2011. *The Creative Capital of Cities: Interactive Knowledge Creation and the Urbanization Economies of Innovation*, Studies in urban and social change. Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester.

Peck, J., 2005. Struggling with the Creative Class. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 29, 740–770.

Roy, A., 2009. Why India Cannot Plan Its Cities: Informality, Insurgence and the Idiom of Urbanization, *Planning Theory*, 8(1), 76-87