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The New Urban Crisis by Richard Florida review – ‘flawed and elitist ideas’

This limited survey of the effects of inequality and high house prices in cities is part of the problem, not the solution



Contrasting buildings in the East End of London. Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

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There is something quite shocking about seeing a new contemporary map of [London](#) in which the rich areas are labelled “primarily creative class” and the poorer parts “primarily service class”. But this is how the American writer and Toronto University professor Richard Florida portrays cities and sees people. There are those who create and those who serve them.

The book opens with its author recounting what his taxi driver told him on the way in from the airport about all the empty luxury flats in London. This feeds into his theory that the “new urban crisis” is about inequality and house prices, and would apparently be solved if only they could both be reduced a little. However, ending the real crisis might not be that simple.

Presumably the taxi driver was “service class” and Florida, who describes himself as “one of the world’s leading urbanists”, is a “creative”, but is what he is creating useful or harmful? Just above his map of London in the book, he claims that “surprisingly, there is not a single tract in London where the working class makes up a plurality of residents...” That claim is wrong, of course, but so are many of the ideas in this flawed book.

People can be divided into social classes: we have been doing it with census data since 1911. But they cannot be easily divided into those who are creative and those who are not. Surely, we are all creative to some extent. Similarly, while it’s true that whole neighbourhoods are no longer saturated by one social group or another, working class people still predominate almost everywhere – especially in London where the large majority of people are struggling in some way to get by, pay the rent, the mortgage, maintain their jobs and bring up their children. Whether they work in the creative or service sector is beside the point.

Yes, inequality and housing prices have risen; but this is partly because people in the US and, to a lesser extent, in the UK were fooled into believing that some people were worth far more than others and that housing in some cities was worth more than it really is. This has led in the last few decades [to pay in the US and UK rising faster at the top than at the bottom.](#)

The New Urban Crisis doesn't look far beyond the US and UK. If it did, Florida would see that cities are more affordable and function better in countries where people respect each other more. Japan, for example, which is hardly mentioned, or the more equitable countries of northern Europe, or Canada.

So what does Florida suggest we do about rising inequality and rising house prices? The answer is very little, apparently. After concentrating on the travails of London, Florida ends the preface to the UK edition of his book by claiming: "Our great urban centres can no longer look to national governments for top-down solutions." His claim is that city mayors are the solution. However, he fails to understand how limited the power of the London mayor is and how unfeasible it is to take ideas from the US infrastructure and try to impose them on the UK. The US has many massive cities. We only have one.

Later, he claims not only that no prime minister, president, or national politician in all of the US, the UK or Europe has ever talked "thoughtfully" about cities and urban policy but that none has the will or the power to do anything about it. That is quite some claim, and like many in the book it is both unsubstantiated and unbelievable.

Bernie Sanders, for one, made urban planning a central plank of his campaign last year, criticising the “ugliness , the greed and the recklessness we have seen [in American cities] from Donald Trump and Carl Icahn”. And the idea that the British government could not help solve London’s problems is laughable. No other body has the power to introduce rent regulation, to ensure that private landlords pay their taxes (huge numbers avoid it), to ensure that schools and hospitals are properly funded, that walking, cycling and public transport are encouraged, that the air is made cleaner, and so on and on. Florida says very little about public services. Neither schools nor hospitals appear in the index and public investment is covered in just five pages out of the 320.

Florida repeats many old myths, for instance suggesting that New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Boston – although all being highly segregated and unequal – offer greater avenues for upward mobility for the poor. They don’t. [By some measures, social mobility is lower in the US](#) than in any other affluent country in the world.

The words at the top of the book’s front cover read: “deserves to stand alongside Piketty’s *Capital ... Essential*”. In a way this is true. Florida’s book is an example of the kind of thinking that got us into this mess in the first place. Understanding that thinking is an important part of starting to realise that we cannot go on like this.

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